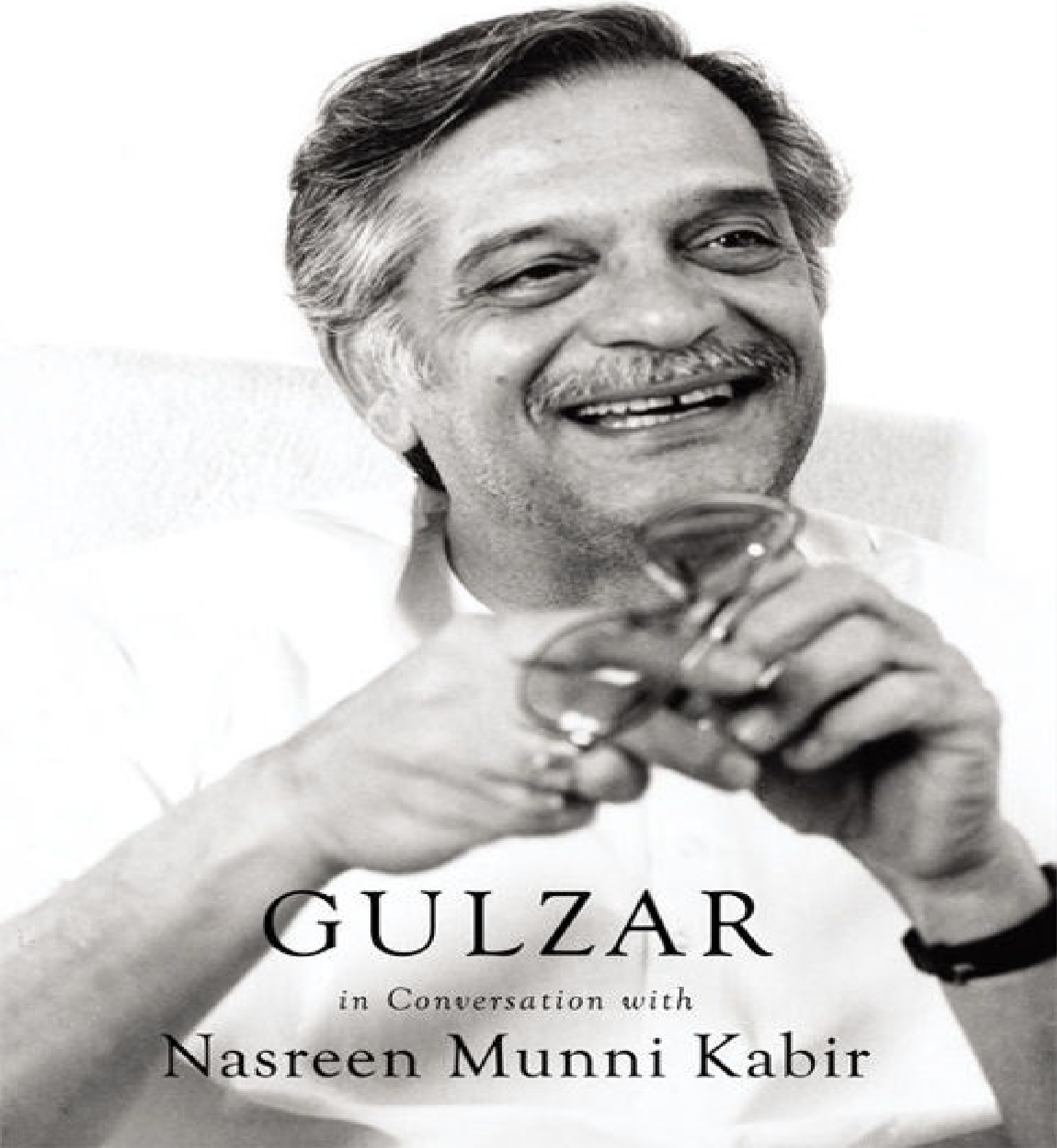
In the company of a poet



GULZAR

in Conversation with

Nasreen Munni Kabir

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Poet, storyteller, director, scriptwriter and lyricist, Gulzar is a towering figure of contemporary Indian literature and cinema.

Ever since he wrote his first song—the unforgettable 'Mora gora ang lai le' for Bimal Roy's *Bandini* (1963)—he has won countless admirers with his nuanced, sensitive and quietly innovative work. From the endearing 'Lakdi ki kaathi', that a generation grew up singing, to the Oscar-winning 'Jai ho'—his songs have enthralled millions. His unique and much acclaimed contribution to the world of poetry continues to reflect our changing times with fresh idiom and delicate turn of phrase.

In this book of conversations with Nasreen Munni Kabir, Gulzar speaks with insight, candour and gentle humour about his life and work: his school days in Old Delhi, where he wrote his early poems; working in a garage in Mumbai before entering films; his association with legends such as Bimal Roy, Balraj Sahni, Sahir Ludhianvi, Meena Kumari, Shailendra, S. D. Burman, Hemant Kumar, Hrishikesh Mukherjee, Lata Mangeshkar and R. D. Burman, among others; his love of tennis; and his deep connection with his wife, the legendary actor Raakhee, his daughter Meghna and his grandson Samay.

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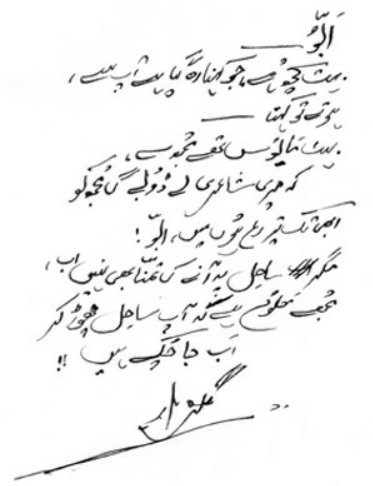
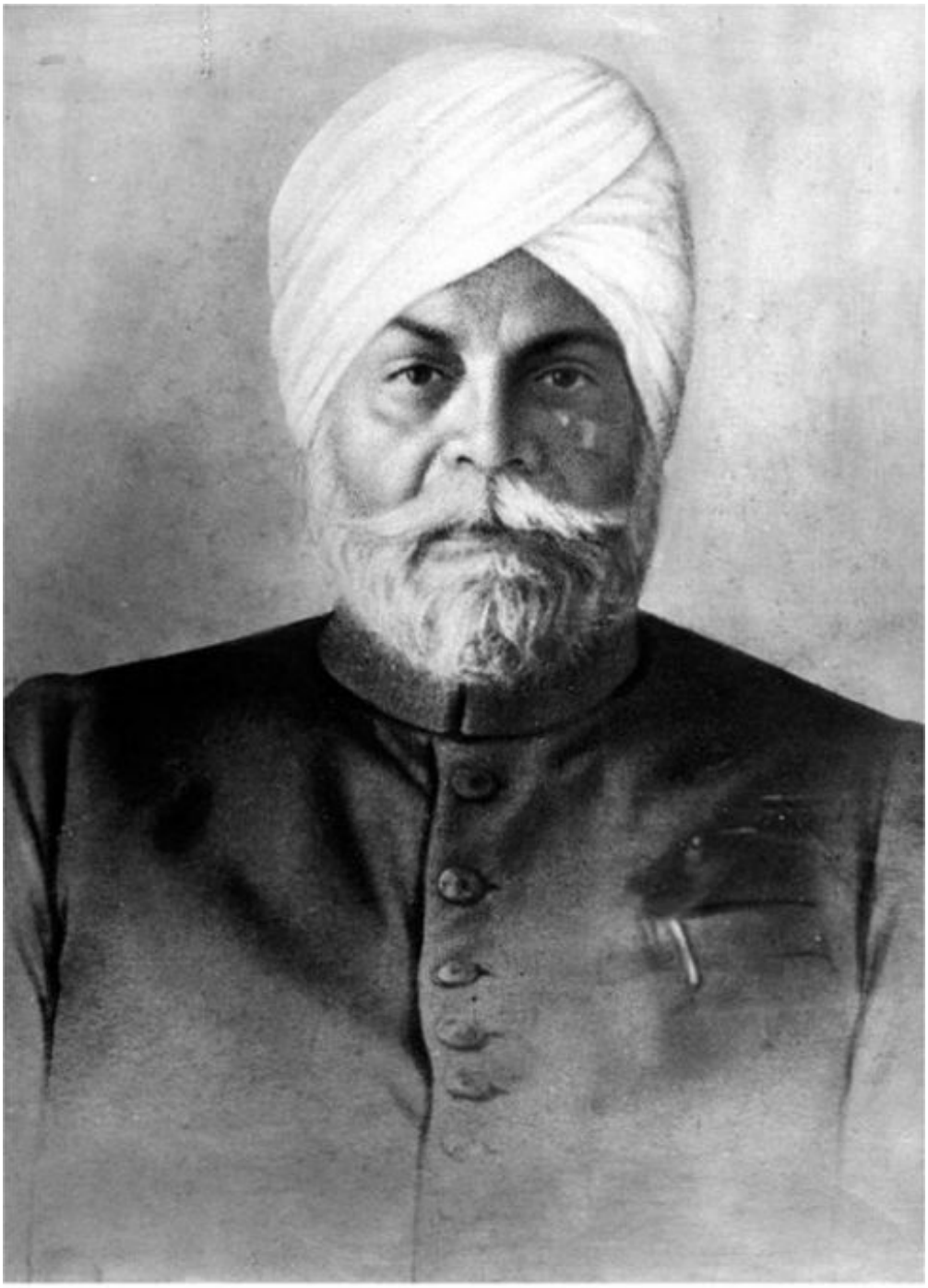
Conversations



Father
There is much to say that is left unsaid
If you were here I would speak
You were so despondent on my account
Fearing my poetry would drown me some day
I am still afloat, father
No longer have I the desire to return to shore
The shore you left so many years ago.

Gulzar



Sardar Makhan Singh Kalra,
Gulzar's father.

A picture of grace

Nearly all stories have back-stories and the story of how I came to meet gulzar Saab dates to 1986 when I was directing a forty-nine-part TV series called *Movie Mahal* for Channel 4 in the UK. Khalid Mohammed, who was working at *The Times of India* in those days as their film critic, helped us by interviewing some of the subjects in the series. Since Khalid knew many people in the hindi film industry, he requested gulzar Saab to let us film him discussing the great lyricists of the past.

Gulzar Saab agreed and asked us to come to 'Boskyana', his house in Pali hill. We were curious about the Russian sounding name of the house—which turned out to be a discreet and unpretentious one-story white bungalow—and later discovered it had been named after Raakheeji's and his only daughter, Meghna, whom gulzar Saab affectionately calls 'Bosky'.

When we arrived on the day of filming, we were directed inside the house through a passage where a row of shoes and sandals were neatly lined. The stonewalled sitting room with its neutral colours was almost austere in mood and appearance. Extending into a corner of the room we could see gulzar Saab's office. Books of all sizes and shapes were stacked on the shelves. His writing table and every other surface in the room heaved under the weight of more books.

Perfectly on time, gulzar Saab came in dressed in a starched white cotton kurta-pyjama and was introduced to us. He was a picture of grace with his fine features, soft-spoken manner and natural reserve. He waited patiently while we set up the shot and when the camera was running he came alive speaking animatedly about Sahir Ludhianvi, D. N. Modak and Shailendra. He had many insightful things to say about these wonderful poets. We left delighted with the interview and honoured to have met him.

We met once again in 1990 when we interviewed him for a Channel 4 tV documentary I was making on Lata Mangeshkar, and as ever, he came up

with unusual and perceptive observations on her singing. In the following years, I saw gulzar Saab sometimes at a film event or a private screening where I noticed that he would leave before anyone else—i later learned that he does not enjoy late nights, habitually getting up at dawn to go and play tennis.

Preposterous as this might sound, the trigger for this book came to me in a dream I had sometime in 2010 in which the great Sahir Ludhianvi and Shailendra bid me to tell gulzar Saab that we should jointly write something on their work. Perhaps the dream was not as outlandish as it may seem, as the reason for our initial meeting involved these very poets. I felt I should at least call gulzar Saab from London and tell him about the dream no matter how overly dramatic the whole story might seem to him.

Before that morning, I never had the occasion to call him and was lucky to have his number at all. A few months earlier when coincidentally I had met him in London, I asked whether his phone numbers—the ones I had from way back—were the same, he wittily said, ‘Wohi hain. Bachpan se’ (They are the very same, since childhood).

His manager, Mr Kutty, picked up the phone and asked my name and told me to wait. Somehow I expected he would come back to say gulzar Saab was busy or out for the day. But surprisingly, a few minutes later, he came on the line. We exchanged a few pleasantries and then plucking up the courage I told him about the dream. He said very little but as we were talking I sensed it was unlikely we would write about the past poets at that point in time, so I took the opportunity to ask if I could write a book on him. He listened attentively and in his usual elegant manner said: ‘Call me when you’re next in India.’

When I returned to Mumbai at the end of 2010, gulzar Saab agreed to the idea of a book. We were keen, as far as possible, to avoid going over the same ground as the existing publications on him, including his daughter Meghna gulzar’s biography *Because he is…* and Saibal Chatterjee’s *Echoes And Eloquences: The Life And Cinema Of Gulzar*. So we decided to talk about his childhood and largely focus on his work as a poet, screenwriter and lyricist. I also believed that even if we were to revisit events that were already known, gulzar Saab would shed new light on them from the perspective of who he is today.

Soon after our initial discussions, I returned to London and we started

conversing on Skype. Between May and november 2011 we had over twenty-five Skype sessions, each lasting an hour and sometimes two hours. Our conversations in hindustani and English were recorded and later transcribed. As many of the events recalled in the conversations relate to the period prior to the renaming of Bombay to Mumbai, Calcutta to Kolkata and Madras to Chennai, I have used the original city names for consistency.

The brilliant thing about chatting on Skype is the lightness of the encounter. If other things needed more urgent attention, either of us could sign off without appearing rude or rushed. I also had a hunch that Skyping suited him because he seemed to me someone who enjoyed intense discussions but not necessarily ones that would drag on eternally. Most importantly, using Skype gave gulzar Saab greater flexibility in choosing the time when he was in the mood for conversation. It was particularly delightful to see how pleased he was that, at the age of seventy-seven, he knew how to use Skype at all. He told me it was A. R. Rahman who had downloaded the software onto his MacBook air so that they could discuss the songs they were working on while Rahman was in his Chennai studio and gulzar Saab in Mumbai.

At the beginning of the process, I was a little nervous about what questions would encourage him to open up and what might put him off entirely. Gulzar Saab allayed my fears by saying he would answer all questions openly and honestly, but cherished his privacy. He comes from a generation where crossing the line is not an option and discretion is valued

under all circumstances.

He spoke of the past and present with equal enthusiasm. If something irritated him, he did not tiptoe around his irritation. I could tell, for example, that it annoyed him when I asked how he came to choose his friends or something on those lines—he suddenly turned stern and wanted to know why I insisted on using the word ‘choose’? he was sure that things just happened in one’s life and there was no grand plan or element of choice.

He is not a man who suffers fools, and therefore might sometimes appear aloof, but in reality his regard and generosity towards the people he cares for is unwavering. As the weeks passed, gulzar Saab’s reserve seemed to melt away. Laughter came easily to him, and he always found a humorous side to events in his life. He was the most emotional when he spoke about his father who passed away in 1960, and of how much he still missed him. I had the sense that he would have loved his father to see that writing did ultimately bring his son an income and great prominence, particularly as his father never believed it would.

By the end of 2011, I returned to Mumbai again and we continued our sessions in his office. If we happened to be working around lunchtime, gulzar Saab would ask me to join him for a simple lunch. His living quarters on the first floor, above the office, are plain and unfussy as the rest of the house. Family portraits of Raakheeji and Meghna dominate the dining area. A framed photograph of his father hangs on the wall of his inner room where he

watches television and sleeps. He is surrounded by images of people who matter to him. It is clear that he dotes on his daughter and now dotes on his grandson, Samay. Gulzar Saab's eyes would invariably light up when he talked about taking Samay for a walk in nearby Joggers' Park.

I was convinced that our work was progressing well, but gulzar Saab, who had read my previous conversation books, felt there was something missing. He asked many times why I avoided adding personal observations in our exchange. He was sure the reader might like to know more about the setting and context of our meetings. He reminded me of the time when he was so involved with the things he was talking about that he forgot to drink the tea that was brought for him. To him, these little details seemed worth sharing. Being a writer himself, he strongly believed my voice, as author, was a necessary addition. But I hesitated to interrupt the free-flowing rhythm of our exchanges with elaborate remarks by me. I did not think they would have worked in the format we had chosen. I also felt it would have somehow lessened the direct connection I wanted the reader to have with gulzar Saab. After some weeks, I finally persuaded him that in the book's introduction I would try and provide my observations that he felt was missing.

It has been a fascinating experience getting to know gulzar Saab. Remarkably, he has not been swayed by the glamour of the film world that he inhabits; which seems to constantly celebrate itself through time-consuming events and parties. He leads a disciplined life, following more or less the same daily routine. He gets up early, plays tennis, reads, and writes for at least four hours a day. It was difficult keeping up with the number of books that he was working on, but when he spoke of one or the other, it was with equal passion and enthusiasm.

Gulzar Saab is an active participant in the whole process of lyric writing, so at times a filmmaker or composer would drop by in the afternoon to discuss the songs they were working on. A few hours each evening are religiously set aside for his grandson, and if there's a major tennis tournament on somewhere in the world, he watches the match on television with undivided attention. Roger Federer, who is to me like the Gregory Peck of tennis, is his favourite player. I think Gulzar Saab sees something of himself in Federer's calm and gracious demeanour.

Less known about gulzar Saab is his reluctance to welcome any visitors, including close friends, when he is feeling unwell. He retreats into himself

and says with a smile, ‘it is better they see me when I am in good health.’

He also refuses to discuss work on Sundays. They are reserved for relaxation and spending time with his daughter and grandson. Some of his friends find this infuriating because that is often the only day they are able to see him. But gulzar Saab will not change his mind and politely explain his reasons.

Among the best mannered and courteous people you could meet, what perhaps impressed me the most was the way in which gulzar Saab speaks to his staff members, his manager Mr Kutty, assistant Farhana, his cook and driver— his respectful tone when addressing them show that inborn grace and compassion run deep in his character.

Discovering a real person behind gulzar Saab’s formidable reputation as a great man of literature and cinema has been a wonderful privilege. Despite his long and prolific career, a career that continues to win him countless awards and widespread recognition, he wears his success lightly. He has his finger on the pulse and feet firmly on the ground. He is a man who remains intensely curious about the world around him and so has a great capacity for reinvention. Gulzar Saab’s work shows the embracing of change, and a constant search for new idioms and ideas. That is probably the reason why, for over five decades, his poetry, songs and films have appealed to people across generations.

Nasreen Munni Kabir

With gratitude and thanks to Meghna Gulzar, Mr Kutty, Farhana Mahmood, Ravi Singh, Jon Page, Peter Chappell and Kadambari Mishra.

Sometimes when I am driving through a small town and my eyes fall on a small ready-to-wear garment shop or a shop that sells fabric, believe me, I get a sort of sinking feeling in my heart. It is as though a black cloud had passed over my head. My heart misses a beat. If my life had not turned out the way it has, I would be sitting in some small shop in a small town selling fabrics. My life could have been just that.

NMK: What do you think draws people to write poetry?
G: People often assume that a poet must have suffered a great deal to want to write poetry. It is not always the case. Poets could be leading blissful lives and yet the urge to write overpowers them. No matter what your situation, I think it is human nature to find a means of self-expression.

I see it as a kind of energy that stirs within you at some stage in your life. If you bring a pot of water to full boil, the pot will inevitably fill with steam. With the build-up of steam, the lid will start to rattle because the rising steam needs an outlet. This inner energy can flow into anything— music, sculpture or painting. For me, it was writing poetry.

I was about ten and at school in Delhi when I was first drawn to poetry. There were other things that also made an impression on my young mind. I found it fascinating to listen to a radio programme or overhear elders discussing a book. The passion of the qawwals at dargahs [Sufi shrines] and akharas [wrestling arenas] would also carry me away, even though I could not fully understand the words they were singing; qawwalis have that kind of effect on the heart.

To hear someone play the banjo was a great thing. The musician moves one hand in one direction and the other hand in another direction and out comes this music. When you are young even a banjo seems a magical instrument. *[laughs]*

NMK: There are many facets of your creative life—you are a writer, poet, film director and lyricist, I am curious to know if you think poetry is still more you.
G: Poetry matches my temperament to a great extent. If I want to show you a sunset on film, I would have to go through many processes to do that—a camera lens, different focal points, etc. Whereas if you read a poem of mine that describes a sunset, it would be a first-hand description of how I had

imagined it.

A sunset in a poem has always been more real to me than a sunset in a film. Personally, I like direct communication and thus writing poetry is still my preferred choice.

NMK: Do you see the influence of any particular poet on your early work?
G: I see imitation not influence! When I started writing as a boy, I was in fact imitating the style of others. When you read ghalib, you want to write like ghalib. You read naresh Kumar Shad's beautiful verse and you try to imitate him. Other poets have written on the flight of a bird or falling dew and you want to find a similar way of saying things. You try and imitate the metre, tone or figurative language of a poem you admire. You tread in the footprints of past writers, some are momentous and others insignificant. Copying is a way of finding your own voice. 'Kabhi naql karte karte aql aa jaati hai' [While sometimes copying others, you gain some wisdom].

I really don't think anyone can claim to have a style straight away unless he or she is a genius. This is the way we all grow and develop skills. Deciding to be original is not possible either. You are or you aren't. The most important thing is being yourself and in doing that, you might come up with a turn of phrase, an expression, a new imagery or a fresh sounding idiom that has meaning.

NMK: I'm curious to know how you chose the name 'gulzar'.
G: it is traditional for a poet to have a 'takhallus', a pen name. A poet's name usually comes at the end of a ghazal and when I used the name 'gulzar', I found it worked in the metre. A takhallus makes you feel important.

I remember the great Urdu writer Rajinder Singh Bedi once said to me, 'There are many gulzars. Add another name to "gulzar". Your name sounds incomplete.' I replied politely, 'Bedi Saaheb, those who have other names can do away with them, but I will stick to gulzar.'

Some time ago, a Punjabi University gave me an honorary Doctorate, but I did not want to add 'Dr' to my name and call myself 'Dr gulzar'. When people started to recognize the name, there was no point in changing it.

I found the name out of fun. It is out of fun that you get serious in life, but life must be fun too.

NMK: Do you ever use your real name?
G: Yes, on my passport and on tax returns. It's funny, but when some people hear that my real name is Sampooran Singh Kalra, they react excitedly as if they had found some lost treasure. *[we laugh]*

NMK: I once assumed you were from UP.
G: That's because of the way I speak—my 'lehja' [diction]. I come from the other Punjab and was brought up in Delhi, which was greatly influenced by the culture of UP at the time. I have lived in Maharashtra for some fifty years and absorbed the culture of this place. I feel a Maharashtrian in my own way. You could say I am a cosmopolitan Indian.

NMK: Do people mistake you for a Muslim because of your name?
G: it happens all the time. They are surprised when they discover I am not a Muslim. My brothers and I are indeed culturally Muslims. We have always loved speaking and writing in Urdu. Saying 'aadaab', or 'insha'allah' comes naturally to us. We make no special effort. I am grateful to my father that he raised us in such a broad-minded way.

You know, some people have even mistaken me for a Bengali. Perhaps it is because my wife is a Bengali and that I speak Bengali fluently. I used to wear the Bengali-style dhoti-kurta at one time. I was an assistant to Bimal Roy and many people are also aware of the fact that tagore fascinates me. To be honest, I am biased towards the culture and literature of Bengal. In any case, Bengal is a part of my country.

I believe things just happen on the path your passions and ambitions take you. They push you in a certain direction, and that's how I walked into the world of Bengal which ended you know where…

NMK: in the marriage?
G: You can say 'Raakhee' *[we laugh]*. Yes, in the marriage. It is important to me that she is Bengali. The subconscious guides you to people and things. For example, I have always loved classical music and though I did not study music formally, I still listen to it. I would take great pleasure in attending the concerts of Pandit Ravi Shankar and Ustad ali akbar Khan.

I had a lot more physical energy when I was younger. Now my pace has changed. I used to love walking around in the city and getting drenched in the

monsoon rain. I would probably start sneezing if I did that now.

By the way, I have the flu today and just got a call from my daughter Meghna—Bosky. She was worried about me and asked after my health. Bosky is playing mother to both her son and father.

NMK: Who gave Meghna her name?
G: Raakheeji. It is the name of a river in Bangladesh. As a family, we form the map of the subcontinent. Raakheeji comes from what is now Bangladesh, I am from Dina, now in Pakistan, and Bosky is from India. *[smiles]*

NMK: Meghna's nickname sounded a bit Russian to me.
G: When Meghna was born she was very silky. *[laughs]*
That's why I called her Bosky. It's the name of a well-known Chinese silk, cream in colour. In the old days aristocrats and zamindars used to wear Bosky shirts. The poet Shailendra was the last person I knew who used to wear it.

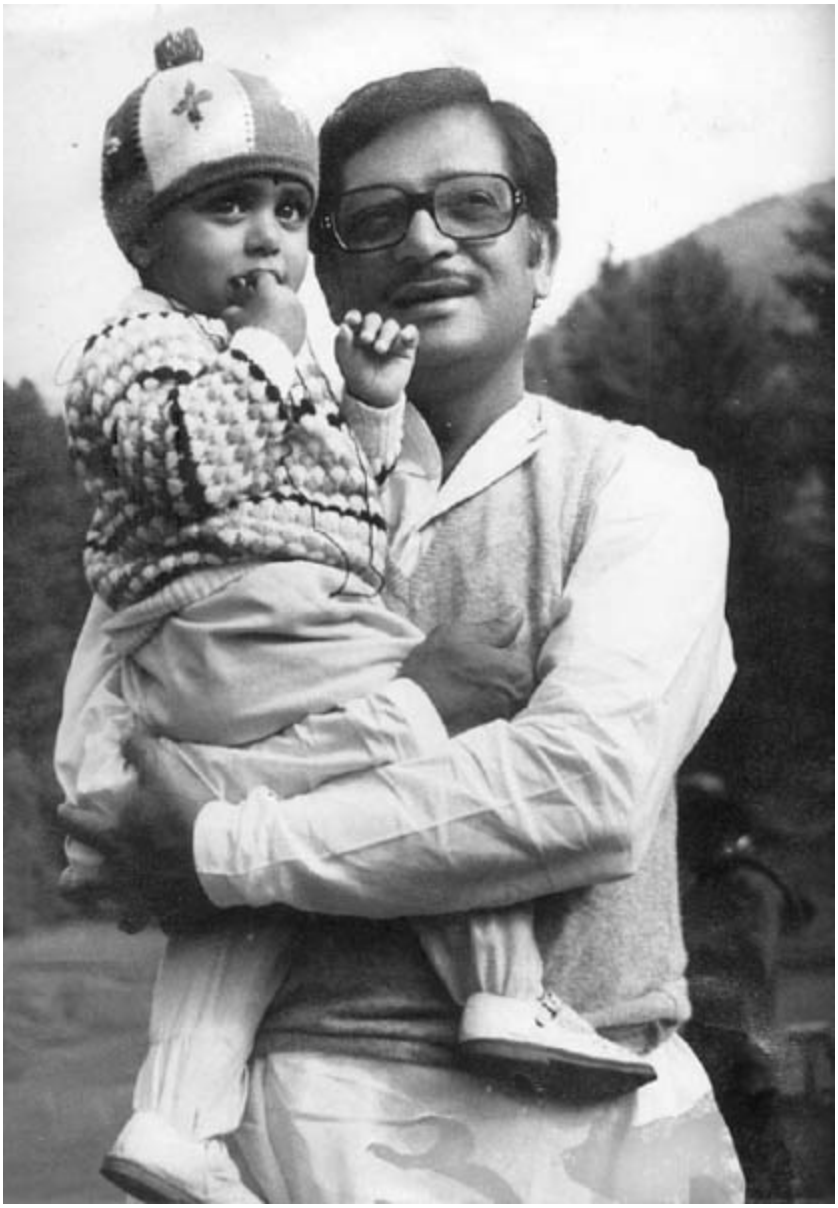
I remember Raakheeji did not like the name and said, 'how can you call a child by the name of a fabric?' The famous producer J. Om Prakash, who was from north India, came over to our house one day and when I happened to call out for Bosky, he exclaimed, 'ah, what a beautiful name for a child! it's so unusual.' it was only then that Raakheeji was convinced it was a nice name.

J. Om Prakash asked me, 'What if you have a son in the future?' I said, 'i'll call him "latha".'

NMK: What is that?
G: now what can I say? Your generation knows nothing! Latha is a 2 x 2 white cotton fabric used for shalwars. The crispy starched shalwars worn in Pakistan are made of latha.

That's what I would have called my son if we had one. When I was very young, my father owned a fabric shop, that's why fabric names come easily to me.

NMK: I read that you lost your mother when you were a few months old. I have always wondered if a motherless child has to rely to a greater degree on imagination in order to understand and deal with the world around it.



With daughter Meghna whom Gulzar affectionately calls ‘Bosky’.

Could the fact that your mother was absent from your life have sharpened your need to interpret the world through your writing?

G: That’s an interesting observation. It may have been true, but honestly, I became aware of such feelings only when I had grown much older. What I remember of my early life was the struggle to find a place within my large family.

My father married three times, all arranged marriages. His first wife Raaj died, leaving behind a son, Jasmer, and two daughters, Mahinder and Surjeet.

Jasmer moved to Bombay in 1946 and has lived here ever since. We meet from time to time. Mahinder used to live in Kanpur and Surjeet in Daltongunj in the district of Palamu in Bihar. Both sisters were badly affected by the anti-Sikh riots of 1984. Mahinder's house was burned down and she and her husband suffered a major financial setback. They somehow managed to move to Delhi and live there now. Surjeet and her husband also suffered in the 1984 riots. They left Daltongunj for Mohali, but the trauma of those terrible days scarred them deeply. They never recovered. Her husband passed away and Surjeet died a year later.

NMK: It must have meant a tragic loss for the family. Forgive my ignorance, but I thought Mahinder and Surjeet were male names.
G: There is a lovely tradition in Sikhism introduced by guru gobind Singh. He believed there was no difference between male and female. So Sikh names are not gender specific and defined by adding Singh for a man and Kaur for a woman. So if there's a Kuldip Singh, there's a Kuldip Kaur. It's a great tradition of equality.

NMK: Coming back to your childhood, what happened after your father's first wife passed away?
G: My father married my mother Sujaan Kaur. I was born on 18 august 1934 in Dina in the Jhelum district, which is now in Pakistan. I was her only child. I was told that she died when I was a few months old. I wanted Bosky to have my mother's name, but Raakheeji did not agree. *[laughs]* I thought it would have been nice.

Actually there is some confusion about the year of my birth. My sister Mahinder thinks I was born in 1936 and not in 1934. In my biography, Bosky wrote that I was born in '36. She explained her reason to me by saying, 'That way I get a Papa who is two years younger.' *[smiles]*

When I look back at the many events in my life, I think 1934 is probably the right year. People did not always record the year in which their children were born. It was not a prevalent practice in north India, as in the South, to have horoscopes made for a newborn. The kundali or horoscope provided the day, month and year of birth. It was a reliable record at a time when applying for a birth certificate was not the common practice.

NMK: After your mother passed away, your father married for a third time. Is that right?
G: Yes, he married Vidyavati. She had five children: trilochan was the eldest, but he died very young. Then there was Prashottam, Jagbir and two girls; one died in childhood and the other, Ravinder, whom we call guddi, lives in Delhi. All my family members are very well off. And I managed to do quite well too. *[smiles]*

NMK: Did you know your mother's side of the family?
G: I can't recall the name of my nani [maternal grandmother], but my nana [maternal grandfather] was called Bhaag Singh. Their faces are still vivid in my mind. They lived in Kala, a neighbouring village somewhere between Dina and Jhelum. They used to visit Dina when I was a small child. When my grandfather saw me, he would give me an anna [one-sixteenth of a rupee] and my grandmother gave me two annas. It was a huge amount at the time and my stepmother Vidyavati used to tease me—my nickname was 'Punni' pronounced as 'pu-nee'—so she would say:

> Punni ka aaya nana, Punni ko de gaya ek anna
> Punni ki aayi nani, Punni ko de gayi do anni
>
> [Punni's granddad came and gave Punni an anna
> Punni's grandma came and gave Punni two annas]

NMK: She teased you in rhyme?
G: I'll never forget her words.

NMK: Do you have any memory of your mother?
G: No. I don't know what she looked like. No photograph of her existed. I miss not knowing my mother's face and that feeling has never left me.

The image I had of a mother was that of my stepmother. To be honest, she was not very kind to me. But I don't want to make it sound like some big tragedy; it is not the right thing to do. I now understand she probably felt burdened by the children of my father's first and second wives.

NMK: How did the rest of the family regard you?

G: Knowing who I was took time. I grew up with a stepbrother and two stepsisters—using the prefix ‘step’ sounds petty, old-fashioned and Sarat Chandrian, so let me start again— I grew up with an elder brother, two older sisters and four younger siblings.

Looking back I think I was trying to find my place within the family. But when you’re a child you don’t know what you’re looking for. Years later you understand that you were probably trying to find an identity.

A poem I wrote describes my situation at the time through the image of a clay art object. at first it enjoys the pride of place in the house. But soon it starts to come in the way of everyone. This happens again and again. The object is placed in one corner and then another, near the door and away from the door. It somehow doesn’t fit anywhere. Finally, when it is put outside the house, it runs away. That’s how I saw my place in the family.

NMK: You mean your family did not know what to do with you?
G: I was like the clay object and they did not know what to do with it.

NMK: What kind of a person was your father? Can you tell me something about him?
G: He was a tall and handsome jaat, a lower middle-class man. His name was Sardar Makhan Singh Kalra. My paternal grandfather was nihal Singh. Both my father and grandfather were born in Kurlan, a village about a mile from Dina. grandfather was a gwala [cowherd] and looked after cattle that belonged to some villagers. He also owned a few buffaloes and cows and used to sell milk and milk products going from house to house.

My father had studied Persian and Urdu till the fourth standard. He did not want to follow in my grandfather’s footsteps. Knowing how to read and write was a big deal for the son of a gwala, so my father thought of himself as an educated man. He found a job as a cook to a sahukaar [moneylender] and travelled with him to Kankroli in Rajasthan. Once he had experienced life beyond the village, my father’s ambition grew and he started to buy cloth in Rajasthan, which he would sell in Dina when he returned home.

As his business started to pick up, he stopped going to Kankroli and went instead to Delhi to buy cloth. Whenever he left the village, the family would say, ‘Munda hindustan chala gaya’ [The lad has gone to India]. Delhi seemed so far away that it was considered another country.

My father struggled a great deal but finally managed to open a bazaazi [a fabric shop] in Dina. He was a hardworking man, and although he had a number of people working for him, he shuttled between Dina and Delhi to buy cloth for the shop. Some years later, he opened a second shop in Delhi's Sadar Bazaar where he sold caps and bags of all kinds and sizes. He also rented a shop space in a building called Fasih on Roshanara Road in the Sabzi Mandi area that was used as a small godown.

As the business in Delhi grew, my father started spending more and more time there while the rest of the family stayed on in Dina. The day he was leaving for Delhi, he saw me crying inconsolably at the railway station as his train pulled out. He realized just how upset I was being separated from him and decided it was best that I should live with him in Delhi.

There is a clock tower on Roshanara Road right across from Roshanara Bagh. On one of the four roads leading off it, my father rented an apartment for the family because they had started to travel back and forth between Dina and Delhi. This was back in the 1940s when apartments had large rooms, a courtyard and even a verandah.

NMK: How old were you when you moved to Delhi with your father?

G: About seven. He enrolled me into the MB Middle School near the Roshanara Bagh gates. I boasted proudly to everyone about studying at the MB Middle School. It sounded so grand. When I was a bit older, I discovered the initials MB stood for Municipal Board. That's all it was. *[smiles]*

The clock tower on Roshanara Road, Old Delhi, 2011 Photograph: Jon Page.

Roshanara Tomb, Old Delhi, 2011 Photograph: Jon Page.

NMK: What was a typical day for you?
G: I used to sleep in the Fasih building storeroom. I would wake up early in the morning and go to the family apartment where I bathed and had breakfast. Then I headed off to school and in the evenings I worked at my father's 'topi-thaili ki dukaan' [caps and cloth-bags shop]. When the shop closed for the night, I returned to the apartment, had dinner and went back to the storeroom to sleep. That was my routine.

NMK: Weren't you a bit too young to be sleeping all alone in a storeroom?
G: Perhaps. You see, there was no electricity in the storeroom so the real problem was how to pass time at night. And that's when my obsession with reading began.

There was a small stall across the road from the storeroom. The stall owner used to sell newspapers, journals and books. He also started a lending library from where you could borrow any number of books you wanted for four annas a week. And so a lifetime of reading began—not with great literature but with Urdu detective novels enticingly titled *Sultana Daaku* and *Behram's Fort.*

The wonderful thing about detective novels is that you cannot put them

down till you get to the last page. So I would devour a crime story every night by the light of a lantern. The following morning, I returned the book to the stall owner and the next evening promptly took another. This went on for days till he was completely fed up of me. how many books would this wretched boy take for four annas a week?

One evening, as usual, I went to collect my nightly read when the stall owner pulled out a book from an upper shelf and gave it to me. He said dismissively, ‘take this, I don’t have anything else.’ I could tell from his expression that he was giving me a book that probably no one wanted. It turned out to be *The Gardener*, a collection of tagore’s poems translated into Urdu. I hurried back to the storeroom, lit my glass lantern and started to read. I was utterly moved by tagore’s poems.

After that, I would ask the stall owner to look for other books with similar cover designs as *The Gardener*. And so I discovered the work of Sarat Chandra Chatterjee, Bankim Chatterjee and other excellent Bengali writers—some wise publisher must have produced the series.

I found myself in Sarat Chandra’s work, in his depiction of the family and in the way he described siblings relating to one another. I could see my life in his words and I would cry as I turned each page. *[laughs]*

NMK: What else were you reading?
G: I read some novels by Munshi Premchand. But it was really *The Gardener* that changed my reading taste. It was the first book that I stole.

NMK: You stole it?
G: Yes. I read it again and again and kept thinking I should return it to the stall owner but never did. Finally I abandoned the idea of giving it back. *[smiles]*

NMK: When you say it was the first book that you stole, were there others?
G: My brother Jasmer was studying Economics at the hindu College in Delhi and was the first member in the family to get a Master’s degree. Before I sat for my matriculation exam, I would take Jasmer’s Urdu books from his shelf and discovered Dr iqbal’s *Bang-e-Dara* [The Call of the Marching Bell, 1924] and *Bal-e-Jabril* [Wings of gabriel, 1935].

I stole my brother’s copy of *Bal-e-Jabril*. I still have it, though sixty or

seventy years have passed. I did tell him that it was I who had taken it. He was a little surprised to know that.

NMK: Where did you sit for your matriculation exam?
G: At the Delhi United Christian School on Ludlow Castle Road near Kashmiri gate. I don't know what the road is called now, but the school is still there.

Delhi United Christian School was known as DUCS. It was also the name of the school magazine. Mr Victor was the principal and the vice-principal was a Mr Morgan who happened to be French. There was a verandah that circled the ground-floor classrooms and a playground lay behind the school. There was a hostel and a chapel beyond the playground.

During the war years, the teachers would gather us children into the chapel and we would pray that the allies would win. The British must have been under tremendous pressure to win the war. I remember reading a headline at the time: 'hitler has not spared Russia, so how can he spare asia?' Those words struck me. it's strange how some things just stay with you.

On the day the allies were declared victorious, all the school children were given a lozenge and a paisa each. Cinemas were free, but we soon realized the exhibitors were playing some old movie that everyone had already seen. Dilli ki zubaan mein kehte, 'Dekho, sasura beimaani kar gaya hum se' [in Delhi speak, we would say, 'See? The rascals have cheated us'].

NMK: You mentioned your interest in poetry began when you were ten. how did that come about?
G: It all started with us playing Bait-baazi at school. 'Bait' means 'shair' [couplet] and so we recited couplets in a kind of a poetry contest.

NMK: I was interested to discover the Persian word 'shair' comes from 'shou-our' which means wisdom.
G: 'Shou-our' in Urdu is also used for consciousness.

NMK: I suppose consciousness is a form of inner wisdom.

Bait-baazi sounds like another form of antakshari, the popular parlour game. For those unfamiliar with antakshari— the basic rule involves a contestant singing a film song whose words begin with the hindi or Urdu

consonant on which the previous contestant's song has ended.

How was Bait-baazi played at DUCS?

G: The Maulvi Saaheb who taught poetry divided the class desk-wise, three rows on one side and three rows on the other. There were some boys including me who cheated by adding a 'ye' [this] to the beginning of a couplet that would normally start without it. But Maulvi Saaheb would immediately catch us out because he understood the metre of a poem perfectly and knew when a line was in the wrong metre.

I had a dear friend called akbar Rashid who played in the rival group. For many years i've tried to find him but never succeeded. Perhaps he does not wish to meet again. anyway, akbar Rashid could recall so many couplets that when his turn came, he could recite at least three on any given consonant. It became a sort of challenge for me—if akbar could recall so many couplets, why couldn't i?

So I began memorizing poems by heart. That was the first stage. The second stage was understanding the meaning of the words. You can recite a shloka every day without knowing what it means. Then one day someone explains it to you and you think, 'is this what I have been saying?' The same thing happens with poetry.

When you understand a poem's meaning, you can never forget it. You find yourself reciting it at some occasion and it is appreciated. The idea of writing poetry appealed to me because reciting poetry was so pleasurable and the appreciation I got made me happy. I remember thinking to myself, 'if I wrote poetry, people would pay attention to me and make me feel important.' That's how it started.

NMK: You mean it began as a need for appreciation?

G: I did not think of it in those terms. But yes, it must have encouraged me to find a means of expression…i don't know. I was also interested in classical music. Like poetry, music has great beauty and the power to move you. If my family had agreed, I might have become a singer instead of a writer. But you can't grow in classical music without training, so I abandoned the idea.

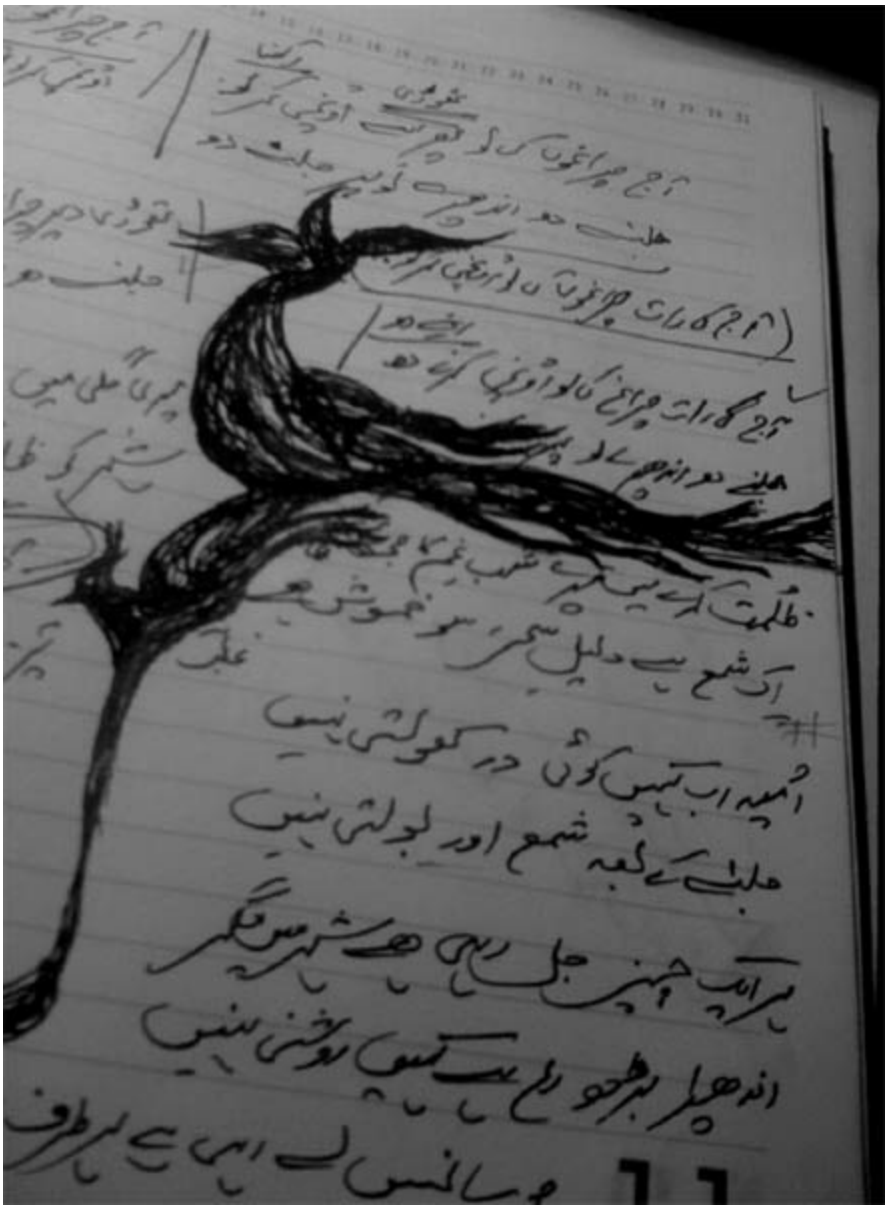
You must remember we were a Punjabi business family and there was no room for the fine arts. Studying music or writing was not encouraged.

NMK: What did your father think of your desire to write?

G: He did not believe I would make a living as a writer. He thought writing was a poor man's job and would say, 'all my sons are sensible and intelligent. They will make something of their lives.' Then pointing at me, he added, 'Ye bhaiyon se udhaar maangega aur gurdwara ke langar mein khaana khaayega' [This one will borrow money from his brothers and eat for free at the gurdwara kitchen].

NMK: Writing may not indeed have given you an income, if you did not achieve the success that you have.

G: You're right. Many writers were forced to write in their spare time, and still are. My father knew the condition of most poets, and in many ways his fears were understandable.



Doodles on writing in progress.

Things have changed for the artist in India. at that time, musicians earned money by playing at concerts, but the number of concerts were limited. at best, you could earn some money by singing on all India Radio. Thankfully, musicians are much better paid now.

Even painting was considered a hobby. to earn a living you could paint signboards and cinema hoardings as M. F. husain did in his early days of struggle. But that was about it. today painters earn a lot of money. husain Saaheb’s paintings sell for millions of rupees.

You know, I find his paintings superb—they aren't fixed frames, but flow into one another like folklore. Somehow the soil of your land is always present in your work. M. F. husain was so attached to India and knew hindu culture so well.

The status of painters has improved vastly today, but in essence the poet's place has not gone beyond the mushaira. We must be grateful to Indian cinema because films gave the poet a livelihood and a position of prominence. I am sure no one would have offered me a thousand rupee job outside of films.

We must be grateful to writers like Salim Khan and Javed Akhtar who fought hard to get a fair price for screenwriters. They did a great deal to improve things. Think of what Sahir Ludhianvi did for the lyricist. He forced people to respect songwriters by insisting their names were announced on the radio when their songs played.

NMK: You said you began writing poetry at a very young age. Can you remember the first poem you wrote?
G: *[slightly exasperated]* They all ask me this question. What was your first poem? What was your first short story? There is no such thing as a first; at least I don't think so. Some people may recall their first poem. I don't deny it is possible, but frankly, I don't remember.

I don't think you can pinpoint the moment when you turn into a writer. Writing is a process and you do not know where it starts or ends. You write something, put it aside, come back to it, go away from it, and finally the writing gains some maturity.

When I write a poem I read it out loud to myself to see whether the emotional experience I'm trying to convey is coming through. I put the poem away and do not look at it for a while. So when I read it again, I hope to have some degree of objectivity and only then can I tell if the words are communicating what I intended to say.

Before a story or poem is finished I must believe it has ripened, 'Haan, pak gayi.'

NMK: Was your father alive when your work was first published?
G: He saw some poems and short stories in print, but not a book.

Urdu newspapers like *Pratap, Milaap* and *Veer Bharat* used to have

literary sections in their Sunday editions. When I was at DUCS, a poem of mine appeared in a Sunday newspaper. That was sometime in 1948—i was about fourteen then.

When a few poems were published, I felt brave enough to submit some short stories and they appeared in a Sunday paper. When you see your work in print, you start showing off and it emboldens you to write more. But sometimes I thought the editor must have needed a filler and that's why he used my story.

If ever a story was returned to me unpublished, I consoled myself by thinking, 'The editor probably did not get around to reading it. after all he is a very busy man.' *[we laugh]*

NMK: Was your father happy to see you in print?
G: *[laughs]* he thought I had gone completely astray. He did not think being published was any great accomplishment. Though I must say there was a glint of pride in his eyes when he told his friends, 'ah, we have a writer in the family.'

NMK: Was he interested in languages? Did he speak English?
G: No. He knew Persian and Urdu and spoke excellent Punjabi too. Bahut achhi gaaliyan dete thay [he had an extensive repertory of cuss words]. That's the trait of a real Punjabi.

He had a unique turn of phrase, so original and unpredictable. Father was forever coming up with new expressions. I remember we used to eat tandoori roti at home and when you took a bite of the roti, it could fill your whole mouth. One day the tandoor [clay oven] in our house had broken down, and so my mother was making a chapaati, a small phulka. It took her longer than usual and father was getting impatient. When she gave him the chapaati, he snapped at her, 'What's that label you're giving me? Do you want me to stick it on my belly?' What an image! I used to think my use of imagery was intuitive, but I have inherited it from him.

He loved poetry, particularly the work of Rumi and hafiz who were exceptional Persian poets of the Sufiana tradition. He often quoted these lines by hafiz:

Aasaayish-e-do gaiti, tafseere ien do harf ast

Ba dushmana muravvat, ba dostaan madaara

[Two words sum up tranquillity in the two worlds
Courtesy to enemies, affection to friends]

Father would use words like ‘sust-ul wajood’. They sounded so unusual to me. If I was lazing about and he wanted me to do a chore for him and I refused to budge, he would shout, ‘Come on, sust-ul wajood.’ it means something like ‘lazy bones’.

NMK: It sounds as if he was your friend.
G: That he was. *[long pause]*

NMK: You spent many years in Delhi. Do you find any trace of the city you once knew when you visit Delhi now?
G: Did I ever tell you about the women who would carry tiffins on their heads as they walked to Birla Mills? They worked in shifts and about ten women passed us singing in their dialects Karnali or Rotaki, now Haryanvi. how can you see this now? The old life has gone. But life has to change.

Delhi is a crowded city now. Old Delhi used to be a sprawling village. The refugees who came from West Punjab to Delhi during Partition were forced to find a new home, and as Delhi was the seat of the government, people rushed to the capital. If you are escaping danger, the centre is usually perceived as a safe place. With the influx of so many Punjabis, the dominant UP culture of Delhi began to fade away. Culturally it has become very Punjabi.

NMK: Why did you leave Delhi?
G: In 1950, I joined St. Stephen’s College and in the middle of the prep term, my father decided that the family should be split up again and I should move to Bombay and live with Jasmer. This was the second time I was separated from the others. I said nothing and left for Bombay. The rest of the family settled in Delhi because my father had lost the Dina haveli during the Partition.

NMK: Was he bitter about losing his Dina home and the business he worked

so hard to build over the years?
G: He never complained. The human tragedy unfolding around him was a far greater shock—a greater blow to him than the loss of material possessions. Jasmer once casually remarked that it was a shame that we had to leave behind so much property in Dina. My father replied angrily, 'You fool! Build your own property, if you have the courage. Who are you to mourn the loss of my home? Millions have lost their homes and businesses and so have I. That's all there is to it.'

NMK: he sounds like a man with great wisdom and compassion and a self-made man too.
G: I think we brothers inherited the need to become independent from him. Jasmer was the first to make a life of his own. Soon after he moved to Bombay in 1946, he bought a petrol pump and opened a shop selling enamel and nitro cellulose paint for automobiles.

Back in the 1950s, most young men came to Bombay with the dream of joining films. So, many people believed that that was what brought me here. But it was not the case.

NMK: What was life like when you first moved to Bombay?
G: I lived with Jasmer and his family for a while, but didn't really want to work in his automobile paint shop. I wasn't ready to mind the petrol pump for the rest of my life either. I was determined to write, so I moved away and lived on my own.

Those were years of terrible struggle. I did many odd jobs, menial ones. I finally worked in a garage called Vichare Motors in Byculla until I became Bimal Roy's assistant.

NMK: Despite the fact that you did not move to Bombay with the intention of joining films, you ended up having a long career in Indian cinema. Was movie-going a significant part of your early life? Do you recall the first film you ever saw?
G: We used to call it the bioscope. Back then, going to the movies was not considered a good thing. Most parents did not allow their children to see a film. But I think *Sikandar* was probably one of the first films I saw.

NMK: Do you mean Sohrab Modi's 1941 film, the one with Prithviraj Kapoor as Alexander the great?
G: That's right. I was very keen to see it because everyone at school was talking about Prithviraj Kapoor, saying, 'Prithvirajji is a wrestler of a man… the way he slaps those strong thighs of his.' *[we laugh]*

Sikandar was the first film our parents allowed us to see. I was a darpok, a timid, fearful boy unlike some of my classmates who would lie to their parents and sneak off to the movies. I couldn't do that.

An image I have never forgotten was from a film that Jasmer and Mahinder took me to see when I was very young. It was a very big close-up of a woman who must have been the heroine. The way she smiled. She had a dimple and so did my sister Mahinder. So I would tease her and say, 'The heroine smiles just like you.' I think the film was *Najma* by Kardar Saaheb.

NMK: if it was *Najma* then Mehboob Khan directed it. Ashok Kumar and Veena played the lead roles.
G: Was it Mehboob Saaheb's film? But I am sure it was Veena. She had a lovely role in *Dastaan* opposite Raj Kapoor. Veena was also cast as a tough landowner in *Aashirwad*, a film I wrote many years later for Hrishikesh Mukherjee.

NMK: *Najma* is a 1943 film, which means you would have been about nine years old when you saw it. What was your first impression of the cinema? Did you enjoy the way films told stories?
G: I don't think I had the faintest idea of the story. The presence of some actors, a song or an image made an impression on me. But I could recall snatches of dialogue between Sikandar and King Porus of India who was played by the director and actor Sohrab Modi.

Emperors and kings in the old movies would use the word 'maabadaulat' when talking about themselves. It means 'by our grace'. And so there was a scene in *Sikandar* in which a bearded man appears in Porus's court, and when this unidentified man refers to himself as 'maabadaulat', the king immediately realizes that the man in disguise is none other than Sikandar.

I don't remember Porus's exact words, but it was something like—'Hum jo keh rahe hain, Sikandar ke saamne keh rahe hain' [I speak in the presence of Sikandar]. Then Sikandar removed his false beard and the audience

clapped loudly. What a great film!

NMK: Do you recall any early songs?
G: I liked ‘Zindagi ka saaz bhi kya saaz hai, baj raha hai aur be-awaaz hai’ [Beautiful is the song of life, it plays and yet makes no sound]. What lovely lines!

One of the first films that Gulzar saw as a child was Sohrab Modi’s Sikandar *(1941) with Prithviraj Kapoor and Vanmala. Courtesy: Mehelli Modi.*

NMK: Is that a song from *Pukar*?
G: Yes. But how do you know?

NMK: I was checking the net as we were talking. [*we laugh*]
G: You’re so quick. Can you look up a song in *Sikandar* for me? it has the word ‘zindagi’ in it.

NMK: ‘Zindagi hai pyar se…’
G: [*completing the line*]: ‘…pyar mein bitaaye jaa.’ There was another line in that song, ‘Apna sar jhukaaye jaa…’

NMK: Pandit Sudarshan wrote the lyrics.
G: Oh wow! he was a great poet of the cinema and also wrote many screenplays for new Theatres.

NMK: I wish there was more information on the people who worked in the early days of Indian cinema—we could see how the careers of artists and technicians overlapped. It would be interesting to discover how one generation influenced the other. how lives entwined.
G: What do you mean?

NMK: You speak of Pandit Sudarshan as an important poet/writer of new Theatres who later worked in Bombay and wrote the songs in *Sikandar*. Prithviraj Kapoor also worked at new Theatres in the 1930s, and who knows, he might have recommended Pandit Sudarshan to Sohrab Modi. It would be fascinating to establish those kinds of links.
G: Cinema history is getting lost. Books on Indian cinema do not have a wide historical perspective. Film journalism here is largely inaccurate and occasionally irresponsible. articles are written without proper research. Some magazines even go as far as printing stories because they are sensational and not because they are accurate.

NMK: It is a terrible pity that so much cinema history has been lost.

To go back to the early 1950s, when you moved to Bombay, did you find adapting difficult?
G: It was difficult because leaving Delhi was not something I had done out of choice. I was sent here. adjusting to my new surroundings did take time. But wanting to write was foremost in my mind and that held me together.

NMK: Was writing a way of rebelling?
G: You may call it that, but it was not rebelling in the classical sense of the word. I did not break away from the family— I untied myself. I didn't want to upset my father. He wasn't even aware that I had moved out of Jasmer's house. If father came to Bombay, I would stay at Jasmer's place for the time that he was there. I did not want to create trouble in the family. That's why I call it untying.

NMK: When did your father pass away?
G: In January 1960 in Delhi. When he died, I lost all incentive to make something of my life. I think if I had wanted to achieve anything, it was to make him proud of me. all motivation vanished with him. It took a long time for me to accept that he was no longer a part of my life.

NMK: Where did you live when you left your brother Jasmer?
G: I moved to Coover Lodge in Four Bungalows, Andheri. The bungalow does not exist anymore and a high-rise has taken its place. Coover Lodge was an old-styled building rented by the great writer Krishan Chander. There were small rooms at the back of the house that were once the servants' quarters. Krishanji decided to rent these out. We were a group of four young men who took the rooms. We were all struggling to make ends meet. There was Rattan Bhattacharya whom we called Bhatta, and Bhimsen who wanted to become a writer, and Mehboob Sialkoti from Pakistan.

I paid a monthly rent of eighteen rupees from the money I earned at Vichare Motors and later as Bimal Roy's assistant. We ate in modest restaurants and employed a boy called Zaheer who cooked for us. When Zaheer left, Babban, a young fellow from UP took his place. Babban worked as a film extra, but that did not give him enough money to survive, so he worked for us.

I found a close friend in Krishanji's younger brother, Om Prakash, whom we called 'Omi'. Last year I met him after ages. His grandson keeps in touch with me and is trying to find work in the theatre and films. Omi is a grandfather now but his spirit is unchanged.

Sahir Ludhianvi lived on the first floor of the main house with his mother and Ram Prakash Ashk, who was an old friend from Ludhiana.

It was an enriching period in my life. We shared so many ideas. Living at Coover Lodge also gave me the chance to observe Krishan Chander at work. His discipline impressed me. He was a committed Communist and wrote mainly in Urdu, and of course his work was translated into Hindi.

NMK: Did you meet Sahir Ludhianvi often?
G: I used to see him at the Progressive Writers' association [PWA] meetings and at Coover Lodge. He was a friendly man, but moody. He was forever arguing with his mother. The poet Jaanisaar Akhtar was a close friend of his,

and Sahir Saaheb treated Javed Akhtar, whom they called Jadu, like a son.

I was a great admirer of Sahir Ludhianvi and liked the romanticism in his poetry. Despite the unspoken rule among Marxist writers to shun romantic poetry, Sahir Saaheb continued to explore romantic themes. It was during the time when we all lived at Coover Lodge that he published his famous collection of poems *Parchhaiyaan*.

He was the first writer we knew who owned a car, a Morris. Then Rajinder Singh Bedi bought a car when he became a producer.

NMK: Who were your friends in those days?
G: I spent long hours with Sagar Sarhadi, an old college friend. I read my poems to him and he read his short stories and plays to me. I praised his writing and he praised mine. We were the two great Shakespeares of Kolivada. *[we laugh]*

The Punjabi poet Sukhbir was another close friend. He introduced me to the work of Pablo Neruda, W. H. Auden, Jean-Paul Sartre and others. I found my reading taste expanding from Indian literature to world literature.

I met Sagar Sarhadi's nephew Ramesh Talwar, the celebrated theatre director, when he was very young. at that point in time he was working at Juhu Arts, Balraj Sahni's theatre company.

I got on well with Balraj Sahni because of our shared interest in literature and connection to Bombay's Punjabi Sahitya Sabha. For a few years he was the President of the Punjabi Sahitya Sabha, and then Rajinder Singh Bedi was nominated. Balrajji's younger brother Bhisham Sahni was an important writer too.

I was actively involved with the PWA and met many people whose work I deeply admired. I remember meeting the Communist writer Yusuf Mannan who was incarcerated at the Nasik jail along with Ali Sardar Jafri. When Yusuf Mannan was released from prison, he started attending the PWA meetings. One day he read us one of his short stories. It was brilliantly concise and beautiful. We encouraged him to continue writing, but he had started to drink heavily and died tragically young.

I attended mushairas and listened to poets like Sahir Ludhianvi, Ali Sardar Jafri and Majrooh Sultanpuri. Their poetry was full of meaning and depth. I wasn't good enough at the time to recite my poems and too young to have the courage to discuss their work with them.

NMK: How interested were you in politics?
G: I spent most of my time with Marxist friends. I believed in their way of thinking. I had read Karl Marx, but was a soft communist. They were all party members.

In those days it was fashionable to become a Communist and the trend lasted for many years after independence. You would see young men walking around with books on the Russian revolution under their arms. This gave everyone the impression that they were intellectuals.

I strongly believe writers must be aware of what is happening in the world and have a strong sense of values. They do not have to be activists, or be actively involved with politics, but believing in some kind of ideology is essential. I don't really know whether to call it ideology because ideology is not necessarily political.

NMK: The many writers you mention wrote in Urdu. What was the status of Urdu at that time?
G: It was the medium taught in schools and colleges in many north Indian states prior to the Partition. We spoke Urdu at home and it was widely adopted as a mother tongue all over north India, even by those whose mother tongue was not Urdu. It did not belong to a single state like Bengali or Gujarati. The first time it inherited a state or country was when Pakistan was created. although it was never declared as such, I think Lahore should have been chosen as the centre for Urdu.

You know Urdu originated in Hyderabad and was known as Deccani or Dakhini, but Lucknow and Delhi have always been important centres. People from Lucknow and Delhi often complained about the way Punjabis spoiled Urdu because of their pronunciation. But pronunciation changes according to the area you live in. We don't speak English or Tamil or Hindi in the same way throughout India, do we?

It is fascinating to think how many great Punjabi writers and poets—in fact, the leading names of Urdu literature— did not write in their mother tongue, which was Punjabi. Some wrote in Punjabi, but only occasionally.

Dr Iqbal, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi, Saadat Hasan Manto, Krishan Chander, Ahmad Faraz, Sahir Ludhianvi—they were all Punjabis. Except for Ghalib and Mir, many major Urdu poets were Punjabis.

Balraj Sahni believed in writing in Punjabi and contributed regularly to

the Punjabi magazine *Preetlari*. He once told me it was Gurudev who had advised him to stick to his mother tongue when it came to writing. When I heard that Balraj Sahni had studied at Shantiniketan and spoke of 'Gurudev,' I knew he meant Rabindranath Tagore.

NMK: Do you think Urdu is a difficult language to learn?
G: All languages derived from Arabic are difficult because the letters in the alphabet keep changing shape. Take 'b' in English, it is always written as b or B. In Urdu, the letter 'bey' has one shape at the start of a word, another in the middle of the word and yet another at the end of the word. You need to learn all the forms of the Urdu alphabet to recognize the letters.

The Urdu script is beautiful and so are all the scripts associated with Arabic because Arabic calligraphy is beautiful. Hindi, on the other hand, is a very easy language to learn because every word is pronounced as written.

By the way, I am going to Hyderabad next week to receive an honorary Doctorate in Urdu from the Maulana Azad National Urdu University. I have written in Urdu all my life and this is indeed an honour.

NMK: Coming back to your days at Coover Lodge—how long did you live there?
G: About nine years, between the mid-fifties and mid-sixties. By the mid-sixties, Sahir Saaheb had moved away to Seven Bungalows and when he finally built his own house in Juhu, he called it 'Parchhaiyaan'.

I moved to a shack-like place in an enclosure known as Jassawalla Wadi near Prithvi Theatre in Juhu, and like Janki Kutir where Prithvi Theatre is still situated; Jassawalla Wadi had a cluster of small bungalows.

I shared rooms with three friends. We lived like one family. On our days off, we went swimming at Juhu beach and read a lot. There was Raghunath Jalani, one of Bimal Roy's assistants who became a director, the Urdu writer Harbans Dost who also worked in films and Nanal who owns the Chopsuey restaurant in Bandra.

Nanal was courting a young lady who later became his wife, and whenever she came to see him, we would discreetly leave and return some hours later. It was an unspoken rule. We called her 'bhabhi' [sister-in-law] and whether she liked it or not, she had inherited a number of brothers-in-law.

NMK: Were you publishing short stories in the 1950s and early 1960s?
G: I contributed regularly to *Shama*, a very famous monthly Urdu magazine published by Yunus Dehlvi and his brother Idris. They paid fifteen rupees for a short story. When I visited Delhi, I would go and see Yunus Dehlvi in his office. He was a very gracious man. When we would meet, he would say, 'Let us save on postage. Why not take the fifteen rupees we owe you?' he could guess by the expression on my face that I was in need of money. Sometimes he would even pay me an advance for a short story they would use at a later date.

I sent my stories to other magazines too. There was no tradition of returning stories in those years.

NMK: Many writers and poets looked to the cinema for survival, especially in the 1950s. how open were you to the idea of working in films?
G: You must always be open and receptive. The subconscious is constantly accepting, rejecting, turning and twisting everything you learn and absorb. having said that, I didn't really want to work in films. It was my friend, the poet/ lyricist Shailendra, who forced me. In a way it was only natural I would end up working in films, given the amount of time I used to spend with him. Bimal Roy's assistants, Debu Sen and Basu Bhattacharya were also close friends, and that made the likelihood of my joining films even greater.

NMK: How did you meet Shailendra?
G: I first met him at the Bombay Youth Choir. Salil Chowdhury started the BYC in 1958. The Youth Choir used to sing in different Indian languages using Western choral techniques. Many of the singers in the BYC also sang in films and often had to choose between a BYC concert that didn't pay, and a song recording that did. As a result, the BYC did not last very long. Even so, Salil Chowdhury was proud that he had initiated a youth choir because it ultimately spread to other Indian cities. Kishore Kumar's wife Ruma Guha Thakurta was very involved with the BYC and launched the Youth Choir of Calcutta some time later. She was a famous Bengali singer and actress and the niece of Bijoya, Satyajit Ray's wife.

NMK: What circumstances took you to Bimal Roy?
G: S. D. Burman and Shailendra had some sort of a tiff and Bimalda needed

a lyricist for *Bandini* [1963]. Shailendra told Debu Sen to ask me to write the songs for the film. I refused at first, saying, ‘I don’t want to work in films and definitely don’t want to write songs.’

Debu Sen repeated my comment to Shailendra. He was older to me, and when he heard my reaction, he ticked me off saying, ‘You’re a great advocate of literature, but do you think all film people are illiterate? People are dying to work with Bimalda. go and see him!’

The scolding had the desired effect and I promptly accompanied Debu Sen to meet Bimal Roy. That’s how I came to write ‘Mora gora ang lai le’.

I was still working at Vichare Motors when Bimalda told me a garage was not the right place for me and I should join him as his assistant, ‘You don’t have to write songs forever. Cinema is a director’s medium. Come and work as my assistant.’ The kind of respect and affection Bimalda showed me belongs to a bygone era.

NMK: It must have been an incredible experience writing your first song with the extraordinary S. D. Burman.

G: Everyone called him ‘Dada’.

‘Mora gora ang lai le’ was written on the tune and when it was ready, Dada asked me if I could sing. I said no. He told me not to go back to Bimalda’s office until he was ready to come along with me. Dada wanted to sing the song to Bimalda himself to make the right impression.

Some hours later we made our way to Bimal Roy’s office at Mohan Studios in andheri. Bimalda heard the song and liked it very much and everyone else did too.

Prior to that time, even Lata Mangeshkar and S. D. Burman had had some sort of a falling out, but Bimalda persuaded her to sing the song. ‘Mora gora ang lai le’ was the first song she sang for Dada after a three year gap. I met Lataji for the first time at the song recording.

Shailendra and S. D. Burman then made up and Dada told Bimalda he did not want to work with a new writer and wanted Shailendra back. Bimalda asked, ‘Dada, weren’t you happy with the song? Why not continue working with gulzar?’ ‘I worked with a new writer in *Apna Haath Jagannath* and the film flopped. I won’t work with a new writer,’ was Dada’s reply.

Do you know which new writer he was talking about? Kaifi azmi! I mean

what can you do if a film flops? *[we laugh]*

Bimalda wanted me to write a second song based on a Bengali poem by tagore: 'Jokhon porbe na aamaar payer chinnh' [When my footprint can no longer leave a mark on the shore]. We were about to start work on the song when I heard that Dada did not wish to work with a new lyricist. Shailendra then took over and wrote: 'O jaane waale ho sake to laut ke aana' [O departing one, come back if you can]. It was based on the tagore poem.

Shailendra found the situation most embarrassing. But I reassured him by saying, 'You sent me there by force. Your handkerchief is lying on the chair, so please take your seat.'

NMK: That expression sounds like your father's way of expressing himself.
G: *[laughs]*

NMK: Did you write other songs for Bimal Roy?
G: When I became his assistant, the cameraman Kamal Bose and I were sent to Calcutta to photograph some location shots for *Kabuliwala*. While we were away, Bimalda recorded two songs for the film, a bhajan and Manna Dey's 'aye mere pyare watan, aye mere bichhde chaman, tujh pe dil qurbaan' [My beautiful country, the garden estranged from me, I sacrifice my heart in your name]. Prem Dhawan had written this beautiful song.

I was asked to listen to the recordings when we returned from Calcutta. There were no magnetic tape-recorders at the time, so we would hear the songs on optical film in a cinema theatre.

Bimalda asked me what I thought and I said I had loved the Manna Dey song. 'What did you think of the bhajan? You haven't mentioned it.' I told him that honestly I had not liked it. 'hmm' was his reply. Bimalda's 'hmms' were famous and meant many things. He always answered everyone with an 'hmm'.

A few days later Bimalda asked me to write a bhajan. It was an awkward situation for me because Prem Dhawan, who had written the bhajan, was a good friend from iPta. I immediately rushed to Salilda who was composing the music for the film and said, 'Bimalda has asked me to write a bhajan for *Kabuliwala*. Should you not tell Prem Dhawan? he is the one who is writing the lyrics for the film, so how could I possibly write the bhajan?'

Salilda explained that it was Prem Dhawan who had suggested my name

to Bimalda. Prem was also an actor and wanted to go on tour with an iPta play in which he was cast. So I wrote my second song, ‘ganga aaye kahaan se, ganga jaaye kahaan re’ [From where does the ganges flow, to where does it flow].

At the recording I met the extraordinary hemant Kumar. He was a tall man, and I have always said he was far above his height in personality and temperament. He was a great human being.

‘Ganga aaye kahaan se’ was the first song to be heard by audiences because *Kabuliwala* was released before *Prem Patra* [1962] and *Bandini* [1963]. I wrote ‘Saawan ki raaton mein aisa bhi hota hai’ for *Prem Patra* while Rajinder Krishan wrote the other songs for the film.

NMK: People always talk of ‘Mora gora ang lai le’ as your first song, but was it actually the third song you wrote?
G: It was indeed the first song I had written but the third to be released. That’s how it turned out.

NMK: I am intrigued to know why you used ‘lai le’ (to take) instead of ‘le le’?
G: That was because *Bandini* is set in a village in Bengal and the characters speak in a kind of village dialect. I used ‘lai le’ to give the song a rural touch. Even though ‘lai le’ is more UP than Bengal—but then the whole film was in hindi. *[smiles]*

NMK: Bimal Roy is an acknowledged master of Indian cinema. Was it intimidating to work for such a great personality?
G: The amazing thing about him was the extent to which he encouraged his team. We were never made to feel in awe of him. He often asked us to tell him what we thought about the film he was making. Bimalda used to sit at his table and the dialogue would be read out. He discussed the script with the whole unit.

I made suggestions if I thought a particular scene was not working or an action felt out of context. This is a vital aspect of a screenplay. Scenes have to emerge from the story and not be added on just because they might look good. Bimalda knew I was a writer and that is why he asked me to rewrite a few scenes for *Kabuliwala*. Some of the scenes were used in the final film.

The *Kabuliwala* screenplay writer S. Khalil was a most unassuming and gentle man. hemen gupta, who had no work at that time, was credited as director, but it was Bimalda who really directed the film. He also helped hemen gupta financially. He always looked after his friends from new Theatres.

NMK: Were you credited as co-dialogue writer for *Kabuliwala*?
G: no. I did not write the dialogue, I only worked on some lines. It would not have been right for me to have a screen credit.

You have to be open and large-hearted when making films. They are the result of teamwork. an assistant or another unit member may suggest something that is used in the film. Finally the responsibility lies with the person whose name appears in the credits. Did he or she approve the suggestion?

NMK: Did Bimal Roy know hindustani or Urdu well?
G: He understood Urdu because he had worked at new Theatres in Calcutta and many of their productions were in two versions—Bengali and Urdu.

His last project ‘amrit Kumbh Ki Khoj’ was his most ambitious film. He asked me to write the screenplay. That gave me a lot of confidence. having the confidence of a director of his calibre was more than enough for me.

I could sense he treated me in a different way from the other assistants. Perhaps it was because he knew I was a published writer. Some complained and asked why I had been asked to write a screenplay. There were some people who were envious and jealous. But what mattered to me was that Debu, who introduced me to Bimalda, would feel proud of me. He told everyone, ‘I brought the right man to Bimalda.’

Debu and I are still in touch. We call each other and chat. I call him ‘Debab’.

NMK: What happened to the script of ‘amrit Kumbh Ki Khoj’?
G: The director of photography Kamal Bose and I had shot some footage for the project at the Kumbh Mela in 1962 or ’63. after Bimalda passed away, I tried to get the rights of the screenplay because I wanted to complete it. But Mrs Bimal Roy refused. She said she did not want her husband’s work to be made by anyone else.

I must still have the early draft of the script somewhere among my old papers.

NMK: Before you joined Bimal Roy, were you going to the movies more often?
G: I liked Mohan Sehgal's films. He made very progressive films. I used to see the films that K. a. abbas directed, but there weren't many of those. Films with strong social themes interested me. The Marxism bug had bitten me—and it was a bug that would not let you go. Marxists are faithful people.

I was never a film buff. Literature was always my first interest, and I preferred attending PWa and iPta events rather than going to the movies.

NMK: Did you see films like *Mother India* or *Awaara* at their release in the 1950s?
G: These films are now considered classics—they have grown in stature and are a significant part of Indian film history. But at the time they seemed melodramatic to us.

The characters in *Mother India* were terrific and the colour photography was just amazing. There weren't many Indian films made in colour in the 1950s, and *Mother India* impressed everyone. But it was a bit melodramatic for my taste. *Mother India* was a remake of *Aurat*. I found *Aurat* a more restrained film, partly because there were not as many resources available when it was made in 1940.

The most fascinating character for me was *Mother India*'s Birju. Yakub's performance as Birju is remarkable. He was such a versatile actor—he could play the hero or villain. He acted in comedies as well. I don't believe he was given the recognition that he rightfully deserved.

Sunil Dutt was also excellent as Birju in the 1957 version and in many ways he brought new layers to the character. It was one of his finest performances.

NMK: Who were your favourite stars of that era?
G: It was impossible not to like Dilip Kumar. Dev anand was another great hero of our time. He really lived life to the full. I remember him by the caps he wore. I once met him in his office and as we were talking, he tried on different caps. no star of Indian cinema looked good with a cap except for

Dev anand. He was so fond of good music.

The most important thing about Dev anand was that he belonged to the generation that defined the new standard in Indian film acting. Raj Kapoor, Dilip Kumar and Dev anand were the stars who also defined stardom—they created the image of the star.

NMK: I saw Dev Saaheb some time in 2011 and told him I thought a star had to have a winning smile. He said, 'Yes, and he must look good in close-up.'
G: *[smiles]*

NMK: What about the actresses of that time?
G: Nargisji was a great actress and Madhubalaji was considered the most beautiful of them all, but I liked nutanji. I observed her working when I was assisting Bimal Roy. She understood how to make a character believable. She could also visualize how subtle actions and gestures would look on the screen.

Kamal Bose had once set up a shot and we were waiting for Bimalda to arrive. When he came, he told nutanji to comb her hair while saying her lines. Even in that simple action, she added her own touch in the way she used the comb. She had a brilliant knack of adding a director's touch to her performance.

NMK: Did you ever see Dilip Kumar working with Bimal Roy?
G: No, but Debu Sen, who observed Dilip Kumar on the sets of the 1958 film *Yahudi*, described how he would approach a scene. Dilip Saaheb would write out his dialogue and follow Bimalda's instructions as far as the movements and timing were concerned. Dilip Kumar would listen with great attention to Bimalda, but delivered the lines like Dilip Kumar.

Bimalda was exceedingly clear about what he wanted from a scene. 'You have to do this action here…and that action there…how you perform is up to you,' is what he would tell all his actors.

NMK: Meena Kumari appeared in Bimal Roy's *Do Bigha Zameen* in one scene in which she sings a lullaby. She brought such radiance to that minor character and to all the characters she played. She was an extraordinary actress.

G: She did not become the character, the character would become Meena Kumari. her personality was always present.

Her dialogue delivery was first-rate. Meenaji knew Urdu perfectly and knowing the language and nuances of tone makes all the difference. When she spoke her lines, her focus was on the emotion and not on the words. She sounded natural, as though the lines were her own and not from a page in a script.

Lataji described Meena Kumari as being completely at ease with herself. That's why her acting had that effortless quality even in highly melodramatic scenes. Think of *Sahib Bibi Aur Ghulam*—how well she handled those big emotional moments in that film.

Once, when working with Mehmood in *Pinjre Ke Panchhi*, Meenaji told him, 'When a scene has story-telling, don't act.' it's an insightful observation.

NMK: What did you think of Motilal and Balraj Sahni?
G: Motilalji belonged to a previous era of Indian cinema. But I did work with Balraj Sahni in *Kabuliwala*. He was a very natural and convincing actor.

NMK: He was just as brilliant playing a sophisticated city gentleman as he was playing an impoverished farmer. His sincerity flowed through every character he played.
G: Most actors just want to play the hero. But Balraj Sahni was a man of literature and theatre, and knew what mattered was a role well written. That is why he did not mind playing character roles. His theatre background helped him enormously when he joined films.

Naseeruddin Shah is a great fan of Balraj Sahni. We once talked about the idea of remaking *Kabuliwala* with naseer in the lead. But Naseer did not think it was a good idea because he felt he could not surpass Balraj Sahni.

NMK: In *Do Bigha Zameen*, Balraj Sahni has given one of the most powerful performances in the history of Indian cinema.
G: I agree with you. *Do Bigha Zameen* is one of the most convincing films of Indian cinema. The film deals with the exploitation of farmers. Even today, the situation is tragically unchanged for many farmers.

Salil Chowdhury wrote the story of *Do Bigha Zameen* and I am sure he

was inspired by a tagore poem called *Dui Bigha* [two acres]. The original Bengali poem is in the form of a story, and though the narrative develops in a different way from the film, you can see parallels with the film's story in the first lines of the poem:

> I had but two acres of land remaining, the rest consumed by debt.
> The Babu said, 'Upen, do you understand? I will buy this land from you.'
> I said, 'You are a landlord with no dearth of land, but look at me, I have barely enough to die on.'
> The king said, 'My dear, I have made a garden and your two acres of land will make it a perfect square. I must have your land.'
> Tearful eyes, folded hands, I replied, 'Please spare the poor his land.'
>
> *Translation from the Bengali*
> *by Ashok Bhowmick*

NMK: It is amazingly close to the concept of the film, though Bimal Roy has modernized the story by setting it in both village and city. People usually say *Do Bigha Zameen* has the characteristics of italian neo-realism, but I have never read about the connection with tagore's poem. That's fascinating and seems so probable given Salil Chowdhury's attachment to Tagore's work.

During your time with Bimal Roy, did you meet Ritwik Ghatak, the great Bengali director? What impression did his films make on you?

G: I knew him and had seen his work. Thematically, his films were very powerful although a bit melodramatic, but he was like that in life too.

One day, a little tipsy, he called me over to him, slapped me across the face and said, 'What's this? You've made a big name for yourself!' it was said with love and affection, but the slap was quite hard. isn't that a melodramatic expression of love?

You know the actor Abhi Bhattacharya? Well, we often gathered at his house to drink and have dinner—what we call an adda [an impromptu gathering]. Everyone knows how much Ritwikda used to drink, at least everyone at the Film institute where he taught for a year is well aware of his relationship with alcohol.

During those long evenings at Abhi Bhattacharya's house, he and Ritwikda would talk about making a new film, and after downing a few pegs they would prepare a budget. This would happen almost everyday.

One evening they were discussing the choice of composer for this imaginary film. As expected, Abhida said, 'Salil Chowdhury.' They were Communist brothers, after all. Ritwikda snapped, 'no! he drinks too much. how can he compose the music?' Look who was calling the kettle black! *[we laugh]*

NMK: Were you also a visitor at Abhi Bhattacharya's?

G: I went there occasionally with Salilda's younger brother Babu. abhi Bhattacharya had an extensive library and was kind enough to lend me some of his Bengali books.

Most film people who came from Calcutta would go straight to Bimalda. He was one of the most established filmmakers among the Bengalis in Bombay and if anyone needed money or work, they found their way to him. And so had Ritwik Ghatak. They knew each other very well.

One day Ritwik Ghatak told Bimalda, 'I will write a screenplay for you.' he was talking about the *Madhumati* idea. I had not joined Bimalda at that time, but Debu Sen told me about this. A few days later, ghatak was overheard telling Salil Chowdhury, 'hey, Salil! I have sold a ghost story to your Marxist friend.' he was of course talking about the film *Madhumati*.

NMK: Ghatak was probably implying that a ghost story would have been considered too populist a subject for a director of Bimal Roy's reputation.

In the 1940s and '50s, there were many people who regarded cinema as having a lower status than literature. Did you share that opinion?

G: No, not at all. It was just that my passion for writing and literature was greater. Even now a book fascinates me more than a film.

By the way, I read your book on Lataji. It was a very interesting conversation. But there aren't enough comments from you. Why not?

NMK: The aim of my questions is to open the discussion. I know it is your answers that interest the reader far more than comments from me.

In my documentaries, for example, I avoid using voice-over commentary

and edit out all the questions in the interviews and simply cut to the answers. I think it is more satisfying when viewers come to their own conclusions about a subject rather than being influenced by a commentary.

I think my documentary background informs the way I have approached writing.

G: For me it was the other way round. When I started directing films, writing informed my filmmaking.

NMK: Despite your having worked for five years with Bimal Roy from 1960–61, it took you another ten years to direct your first film in 1971. What happened in the interim?

G: During the time that Bimalda was extremely ill, I continued working at BR Productions. We tried to keep the company afloat and made *Do Dooni Chaar* that Debu Sen directed. It was our last film for Bimalda's company.

Losing Bimalda was devastating. It felt as though I had lost my father all over again. We all had the deepest regard for him. He nourished us.

After he passed away, it was Hemant Kumar who took care of us. He knew Bimalda's unit was bound to scatter and found work for everyone. It was a huge gesture.

He helped Bimal Roy's personal secretary, Mukul Dutt, to write songs for Bengali films. Mukul Dutt later married Chand Usmani. Every now and then he would ask me to write a love letter to her in Urdu. When I tried reading some lines back to him, he would say, 'Don't read my letter…just write it!'

NMK: How did Hemant Kumar help you to find work?

G: Hemant Kumar was composing music for Asit Sen's *Khamoshi* and he persuaded asit Sen to take me as screenwriter and lyricist.

Hemantda also introduced me to Hrishikesh Mukherjee who was making the film *Aashirwad* at more or less the same time as *Khamoshi*.

I hadn't met Hrishikesh Mukherjee before then because he had already left Bimal Roy and was working as an independent director by the time I joined Bimalda. When we met, thanks to Hemant Kumar, hrishida asked me to write the screenplay and songs for *Aashirwad* [1968] and later for *Anand* [1971]. Vasant Desai scored the music for *Aashirwad* and *Guddi*. The *Guddi* song, 'Hum ko mann ki shakti dena' [give us strength of mind] is still sung as a prayer in schools.

Through Hrishida, I met the producer of *Anand*, N. C. Sippy, who gave me a break in 1971 as director.

I went from Bimalda to Hrishida and from hrishida to N. C. Sippy.

NMK: It is widely acknowledged that the screenplays of Salim-Javed helped to create the character that Amitabh Bachchan perfected in the 1970s, roles that brought him iconic status.

Similarly, I believe that your work with Hrishikesh Mukherjee—your screenplays with their natural and everyday language—was instrumental in helping to build Rajesh Khanna's persona, which consequently earned him the title of Indian cinema's first superstar.

G: Rajesh Khanna's passing this year is another personal loss and a big loss for the film industry. He reached a peak that no other actor of his era had. Everyone in the industry called him 'Kaka'.

We had major stars before Rajesh Khanna; there was K. L. Saigal, Karan Diwan and of course Dev Anand, Raj Kapoor and Dilip Kumar. But it was only in the 1970s that the term 'superstar' was used in India. The earlier stars had a significant fan base, but Rajesh Khanna created a kind of hysterical following that we had never seen before.

We must remember the times were changing as well, and the post-Shammi Kapoor youth was far more forthright in voicing its enthusiasm, this was especi. It was all too much for me. I had stage frightally true of young women who were unlike the presumedly docile generations of the past.

Although Kaka's career had started in the 1960s, it was probably *Anand* that helped him make the big leap forward. Like Jaya Bhaduri who became so popular as the girl-nextdoor, Rajesh Khanna was also perceived as the boy-next-door. In other words, a gentle romantic character whom you would happily introduce to the family as a future son-in-law. Kaka did not play the larger-than-life he-man types. He spoke in everyday language, and people identified with him. The characters he played in *Anand*, *Khamoshi*, *Bawarchi*, *Andaaz* and *Palkon ki Chhaon Mein* made people feel—'ah, he's one of us.'

NMK: You won the *Filmfare* award for Best Screenplay and Dialogue for *Anand*. That must have been exciting.

G: I was so nervous that I didn't attend the awards function. I was shooting

Parichay with Jaya Bhaduri and Jeetendra, and asked Jaya to collect the award on my behalf.

In the early days, the *Filmfare* awards ceremony used to take place in the gigantic Shanmukhanda hall. They used to erect a podium in the centre of the stage—so you had to cross the stage, step onto the podium, receive the award and say a few words in front of hundreds of people. It was all too much for me. I had stage fright. Finally Hrishida received it on my behalf.

NMK: You hold the record of having received the greatest number of *Filmfare* awards—twenty in all—these were for a combination of Best Screenplay, Dialogue, Direction and Lyrics. Do you still shy away from award ceremonies?
G: I am quite shameless now and collect every award that I am given. *[we laugh]*

NMK: Was winning the Oscar for the *Slumdog Millionaire* song 'Jai ho' a great triumph?
G: The magic comes from Rahman. Ravi Shankar and Uday Shankar in their era took America by storm, and I believe Rahman is doing the same thing in his generation. He has achieved tremendous global recognition, first with 'Chal chhaiyyan chhaiyyan' and now with 'Jai ho'.

Sharmila Tagore called me a few months ago and asked me why I hadn't attended the Oscar ceremony. I told her it was because I did not have a black jacket. She laughed and said, 'Even if you had one, I know you would not have gone.'

NMK: What did you feel when you received the Padma Bhushan, India's third highest civilian award, in 2004?
G: You sound like a journalist from the Indian media who, always asks, no matter what the occasion, 'how do you feel about such and such…' *[laughs]*

It is a clichéd response to believe that at the very instant you are receiving a great honour you will think, 'if only my father was here,' or something of the sort. That's a very filmy thought. But I am sure the fact that I was awarded the Padma Bhushan would have made my father proud.

NMK: What about the many awards you received for your film songs?

G: He always believed writing was not serious business. In his view a miraasi [court entertainer] was always a miraasi. Do you think his values would have changed because of the awards I received?

I am reminded of an incident involving my friend and roommate Harbans Dost. His family came from the Punjab to meet him when I was working on *Kabuliwala*. They were keen to see Balraj Sahni who was very famous, so Harbans Dost asked me if he could bring them to the *Kabuliwala* set. His uncle's reaction was very interesting. He spoke in Punjabi and basically said, 'Balraj's profession is hardly a dignified and noble one. Sometimes he has to wear a false beard and sometimes he doesn't. As far as money is concerned even nautanki dancers can earn money.' *[laughs]*

That was the typical reaction of someone from a Punjabi village. They were not being harsh but honest and straightforward. People of those times had simple values and a simple way of living. Even having a telephone line was a sign of prosperity then. So I don't believe they considered working in films something of great importance.

NMK: I am still convinced your father would have been proud of you.
G: I can't be sure how he would have felt. He never thought I would earn a living from writing. He used to say I would survive by borrowing money from my brothers. And finally this son of his did become a famous man who owns a house and a car.

NMK: I was thinking more about the joy he would have felt seeing that you had fulfilled your dreams of becoming a writer—that you achieved what you set out to do.
G: Yes. That might have made him happy.

NMK: You have achieved so much in your life, I wonder how the awareness of your achievements manifests itself in your daily life?
G: Yesterday at Prithvi Theatre I met a young man called Neeraj who studied at MICa, the Mudra institute of Communications, Ahmedabad. He gave me a copy of the thesis he has written on my lyrics. My friend Ashok Bindal was standing next to me. I turned to him with the thesis in my hand and said, 'Bindal Saab, I think I must have done something in my life. Otherwise why would anyone write about my work?'

A young lady in Delhi, Saba Bashir has also written a PhD on my poetry and songs. She is turning it into a book. She came to see me and interviewed me a few times. Saba has a very nice husband and children. husbands who let their wives work and fulfill their ambitions are invariably good people.

NMK: Looking back to 1966–67, when you were about thirty, your career took another turn when you started writing screenplays. What gave you the confidence?
G: The fact that I had seen many IPTA plays helped. I knew how plays were produced because I had worked as a stagehand on Balraj Sahni's *Shah Badshah*. My experience of short story writing was helpful too. But what helped me the most was having assisted Bimalda.

NMK: Hollywood films frequently rely on the first-person narrative. The best example is Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard*. In the opening shots we see the dead body of Joe Gillis, played by William Holden, floating face down in a swimming pool and Joe narrates the events leading to his murder in voice-over.

Indian films did not use the first-person narrative much until more recently, did they?
G: You are right. The first person narrative was uncommon in Indian cinema when I began writing screenplays. My experience of writing short stories helped me to create characters and build plots, but when it came writing for films, I knew I could not describe the hero through a voice-over, or in a screen caption that read—'Here is a dishonest man.' You learn very quickly that film is an illustration of character through action and dialogue.

The same applies when you develop a scene. In a story you can go into detailed descriptions and write—'it was a stormy night and it rained incessantly. The next morning, he stirred from his sleep. Slowly he made his way to the riverbank and waited for the boat.'

Just in the way you develop characters through action and dialogue, you need to illustrate the setting—the stormy night, the dawn and the riverbank. So you ask yourself how many shots do I need to develop the action? How to convey things briefly? You will have an incredibly long film if you go into every detail, so you find ways of showing the essential.

These are the basics of screenwriting. It takes a much longer time and a

great deal of experience to understand the craft at a more subtle level.

NMK: During the years you were working with Hrishikesh Mukherjee, did you write songs or screenplays for other film directors?
G: Yes, but somehow most of the filmmakers I worked for happened to be Bengali. I was writing screenplays and songs for Asit Sen and lyrics for the films that Hemant Kumar was composing for.

NMK: Directors and writers invariably argue. Did you have many disagreements with Hrishikesh Mukherjee?
G: Hrishida gave me a lot of freedom. I learned a lot working with him. He usually had three films in production concurrently and so we three writers, Rahi Masoom Raza, Rajinder Singh Bedi and I, were kept busy.

Of course Hrishida and I had our occasional differences, though I believe no one has managed to equal his sense of timing and storytelling.

You will recall that *Guddi* is set in the world of filmmaking. An entire floor at Mohan Studios had caught fire and was completely gutted. hrishida decided it would be a good idea to film the destroyed floor and use the shots as a backdrop for a new scene that he told me to write. In this new scene, a photographer wants to take a picture of the star Dharmendra who plays himself in *Guddi*. Dharmendra is angry and shouts at the photographer, etc.

The scene was far too melodramatic for my taste and I protested, 'The rest of the film is low-key and this is just too loud.' hrishida insisted that I write it. How could I say no to the boss? So I wrote the scene with D. N. Mukherjee, Hrishida's younger brother, whom we called Chotuda. He used to work on the screenplay with me.

When *Guddi* was released at the Lido cinema in Worli in 1971, we went to see it on the first day, first show. Hrishida was in front and Chotuda and I stood behind him in a dark corner of the cinema. When the photographer's scene began and Dharmendra spoke his lines, the hall erupted with thunderous applause. Hrishida turned around and looked at us, and sheepishly we slipped out of the cinema. *[we laugh]*

There was a similar situation in *Namak Haraam* [1973]. Amitabh plays Vikram, the son of the mill owner Damodar Maharaj who organizes the murder of him, a trade union leader, played by Rajesh Khanna.

I told Hrishida, 'Somu should not be the one who dies, but the mill owner

should die instead.' Hrishida said, 'no, I promised Kaka he would die in the film.' So what could I do? I had to work his murder into the story.

Later in the film, Damodar is all upset that Somu had died—although he was the man who had Somu murdered. The whole thing seemed utterly illogical to me. Hrishida said, 'Don't go by logic. Emotions are stronger than logic. Make the scene emotional.' Hrishida was right and, believe me, the audience would start sobbing in that scene.

Hrishikesh Mukherjee's school of filmmaking does not exist anywhere else in the world. He did not make the usual love story, but character-driven stories. He created a unique world in his movies. Don't forget, he pioneered the small budget film in the 1970s and would shoot his films in twenty-four days.

NMK: Perhaps he knew how to shoot economically because he began his career as an editor.
G: That's right. He knew how to cut around a scene. Cinematically, his films are not glossy. He filmed in his own house, converting each room into the set that he required.

NMK: You formed a very popular director-writer team with Hrishikesh Mukherjee. Which past screenplay director-writer combinations had you liked?
G: They were many excellent writers and directors in the 1950s. Abrar Alvi was very prominent and wrote superb dialogue. But I find dialogue is not of primary importance in Guru Dutt's work. It is the visuals that matter. guru Dutt's scenes are full of action and movement and he would add understated and poetic dialogue to that energy. His films are so cinematic.

I did not manage to meet Guru Duttji, even though he was working in a studio in Andheri near us. I thought we were bound to meet some day, but then he suddenly died. I deeply regret not meeting him.

NMK: The most famous screenplay is probably *Mughal-eAzam*'s, which was written by Wajahat Mirza, Kamaal Amrohi, Amanullah Khan and Ehsaan Rizvi. I am sure you admired their excellent work.
G: They were amazing writers. Every line in that film is brilliant. *Mughal-e-Azam* is so beautifully staged as well. asif Saaheb created scenes in a

spectacular way, but he depended a great deal on dialogue.

Did you know his office was in the same compound at Mohan Studios where BR Productions had their offices? Every so often our Moviola would stop working and we would have to ask Asif Saaheb if we could view a reel on his editing table. I think he was the first director in Bombay to own a Steinbeck.

I remember a wonderful encounter with Asif Saaheb. The tailor and costume-maker, Maqsood Mian, had a small room where he worked in the Mohan Studios compound. There was a public telephone just outside his room, and as our office phones were forever out of order, we would make our calls from there.

One day I was talking to my friend Sukhbir on the phone, and we were chatting away. When I happened to turn around, I saw Asif Saaheb standing behind me, waiting to make a call. I told Sukhbir in Punjabi that I would call back later and quickly hung up.

Asif Saaheb placed his hand on my shoulder and said, ‘Mian, you talk just like a Punjabi. how did you learn the language?’ ‘I am a Punjabi,’ I replied. Then he addressed me in Punjabi, ‘I thought you were a Bengali. Everyone in the studio thinks you’re a Bengali.’ He could not believe I was from the Punjab.

Asif Saaheb had a very impressive personality. He always wore a white shalwar-kurta and would famously hold his cigarette between his third and little finger and take a deep drag—the little finger is called ‘chhungli’ in Urdu.

NMK: You must have met Nabendu Ghosh who worked closely with Bimal Roy. How would you define his writing skills?

G: He was very good at shaping a scene and was a cut above the others in that respect. His scenes are striking because they are so realistic; there is nothing fake or artificial about them. They grow slowly like plants. Unlike K. Asif’s majestic and grand vision, Nabenduda’s scenes are humble and modest.

NMK: I can see why Bimal Roy and Nabendu Ghosh worked so well together. The world Ghosh created in words, and Bimal Roy in images, have the same quiet sensitivity.

In Hollywood it is usually the same person who writes both screenplay and dialogue. But historically, there has been a division of tasks in Indian cinema. Why is that?

G: The same person should write both the screenplay and dialogue. In addition, it helps if the same person writes the songs as well.

Rajinder Krishan always wrote the screenplay, dialogue and lyrics, and did so for a number of Hindi productions made in the South. He spoke Tamil and even wrote several tamil screenplays for AVM Studios.

He would write the scenes at night and deliver them early the next morning to a commercial airline pilot who was flying to Madras. An assistant would collect Krishan Saaheb's dialogue from the Madras airport and rush to the studio where the scenes would be shot. Despite the fact that Rajinder Krishan was extremely busy, I never saw him tense or anxious. His idea of relaxation was going to the races!

He was not a man with literary pretensions and could write dialogue for any kind of character. He wrote songs in the vocabulary of the character. Take the *Badi Bahen* number 'Chup chup khade ho zaroor koi baat hai' [You stand without saying a word, there must be something amiss], it works as both lyric and dialogue.

Coming back to your question—why the same person doesn't write the screenplay and dialogue in India? That's because we have so many languages. Nabendu Ghosh wrote great screenplays, but he was a Bengali and could not write hindi or Urdu, so another writer had to step in. The celebrated Urdu writer Rajinder Singh Bedi, who had a vast literary background, therefore wrote the dialogue of a film like *Devdas*.

I remember discussing a scene in *Devdas* with Bedi Saaheb. The scene takes place in a classroom at the beginning of the film when Devdas and Parvati are children. all the children are repeating the lesson in unison —'Paanch chhakke tees. Chhakkam chhakka chhattees' [Six fives are thirty, six sixes are thirty-six]. The children's lesson ends at the moment when the school bell rings and they all shout—'Chhuti!' [class over]

He explained that by using the six times table, and not any other number, he could establish the sound of 'chh' early on in the scene, and so seamlessly build to the end of the lesson with the cry, 'chhuti'. Phonetics and alliteration determined his choice. You will not find this kind of detailing in the language of Wajahat Mirza, Amanullah Khan or Abrar Alvi.

Bedi Saaheb's dialogue did not rely on punch lines. The situation provided the punch. His dialogue was to the point. If he wrote three lines and discovered what needed saying could be expressed in a single line, he would cut out the rest.

NMK: his dialogue is hugely understated in *Devdas*. I am thinking of the scene when Devdas returns to his village after many years. He is meeting Paro for the time as an adult. Devdas goes to her house to see her, but she has rushed upstairs to her room. He follows her. Paro waits for him in the half-lit room. She lights a diya so she can see his face, the sound of the conch underscores the scene, and Devdas says: 'Tum…kya ho raha hai?' [You? What's going on?] Bedi's casual line counters the emotionally charged situation so effectively.

G: That was his talent. He did not overemphasize a situation. He was a master of the craft. You know, he also wrote the dialogue of *Mirza Ghalib* [1954], which was based on a story by Saadat Hasan Manto. I recall a line from the film: 'Ma, vo chaand suraj thode hi hain jo roz roz aa jaate hain' [Ma, he is hardly like the sun or the moon that routinely come into view].

What a magnificent way of describing ghalib. Bedi Saaheb's literary flavour is manifest in this simple image.

NMK: Did you see him often?

G: I knew Bedi Saaheb from the PWA meetings. Whenever he would visit Krishanji at Coover Lodge, and if he happened to spot me, he'd come over to my tiny room in the outhouse to chat for a few minutes. He would smoke a cigarette and leave. He was such a friendly and open man despite being such a celebrated writer.

The memories of such encounters never fade—to see people you idolize behave in such a warm and unassuming manner influences your own behaviour. You learn the value of humility.

NMK: You are unassuming too. When I see you interact with people, you are always generous and warm in the way you address them, even when they are strangers.

Coming back to the writing of screenplays and dialogue, you always wrote both, didn't you?

G: Yes. But I did not feel the need to write dialogue per say. I am not saying I was necessarily good, but I tried to avoid stagey dialogue. Lines just happened as I wrote a scene…they would come to me in a natural flow.

In *Anand* there is a scene in which a fat man passes by and Anand, who was played by Rajesh Khanna, calls out, 'hey, motay!' [hey, fatso!] now this is not really dialogue, but a verbal expression of the character. Anand is a playful sort who cannot remain silent if he sees an overweight man. Hrishikesh Mukherjee who directed the film seemed to like this approach.

In *Aashirwad*, a man snatches a gold chain and is caught. A crowd gathers around and a minor character says, 'Oho, ye government nahin chal sakti hai' [This government won't last]. I think an off-the-cuff remark like that works well. I preferred dialogue to flow from the context rather than to stand out.

I believed in writing colloquial dialogue. Sometimes I would not complete a sentence. I don't always speak in full sentences and used to write dialogue a bit like that. I once wrote a scene for Ramesh Sippy's *Andaaz* in which the character that Shammi Kapoor plays asks a boy where his mother is. The child answers cheekily, 'Naha rahi hai, bulaaoon?' [She's bathing. Shall I call her?] it's the way people talk in everyday life.

NMK: How do you vary the vocabulary for each character?
G: When you meet a group of people in real life situations, you find each individual has a different way of talking. Similarly, I cannot write dialogue for a group of characters and give them my language, the language of the author. I have to vary the styles of speech.

NMK: Writing screenplays must have been very satisfying, but was the ambition of directing on your mind?
G: I was keen on directing films. Thanks to Bimalda, I learned a lot about film direction, but was unable to make a film immediately.

In 1969, I went to London with Hrishida—it was my first visit abroad. He was directing 'Udham Singh', which was finally released in 1987 with the title *Jallianwala Bagh*. The producer Balraj tah ended up directing it because Hrishida pulled out of the project.

Hrishida had taken me to London to write a few scenes, and I acted in the film as well. All the Hindi-speaking assistants were given walk-on parts.

They needed someone to play a Maharashtrian journalist, so I told Hrishida I would do it. It was freezing in London and I knew this character would be given a coat, as he was supposed to deliver a speech in Hyde Park. Prior to our London trip, Hrishida and I talked about adapting 'guddo', one of my short stories, into a film, which we renamed *Guddi*. While we were shooting 'Udham Singh', hrishida told me he wanted to make *Anand* and *Guddi*. He asked me to write the screenplays for both films and said I could direct one and he'd direct the other. This is what Hrishida promised, but when we returned to India, he changed his mind and directed both the films. *[laughs]*

NMK: How did you finally make your first film?
G: N. C. Sippy wanted to make a Hindi version of a 1968 Bengali film called *Apanjan* by tapan Sinha. This became *Mere Apne*. I wrote the script for Tapan Sinha, but he dropped the idea of directing the Hindi version.

I told N. C. Sippy that if Hrishida wanted to make *Mere Apne*, it was fine by me, but if they were looking for a director, I would like to be considered. We were walking towards his car as we talked and before Sippy Saaheb got into the car, he asked me to come to his house at four the next morning with the script.

NMK: At four in the morning?
G: Yes, he always held his meetings at four or five. He had this habit of waking up very early and making his own tea. at six, he would play music very loudly so everyone in the house was forced to wake up.

I have always been an early riser, but to get to Sippy Saaheb's house on time, I had to be up at three. I somehow managed to get there by four. The first thing he said as he opened the door was, 'You have passed the test. I wanted to see if you would show up on time. Now I know you're keen to direct.'

I narrated my script of *Mere Apne* to him. He asked me who should play the old lady Anandi Devi. My first suggestion was Chhaya Devi because she had played the role in the Bengali version and knew the character well. He made a face and said, 'Nahi, yaar. We must have an attractive looking woman. Don't be like Hrishikesh Mukherjee who likes sombre faces.' *[laughs]*

When I suggested Meena Kumari, he turned around and said, 'Why not

take Nimmi?'

'I don't think she will be right for the part,' I replied. Sippy Saaheb confessed that he had a crush on nimmiji in his college days and that's why he had thought of her.

NMK: And what was your reason for suggesting Meena Kumari?
G: Not because I had a crush on her. *[laughs]* The first time I met Meenaji was on the sets of *Benazir* in 1962 or '63. We shared a love for poetry.

Sippy Saaheb asked, 'Will you speak to Meenaji or should I?' I didn't want to discuss contracts and money with her, so I asked him to do the talking. Sippy Saaheb warned me that Hrishida, who was his business partner, had to first agree to my directing.

During the filming of Mere apne, *released in 1971*.

He said the best way out was that his eldest son Romu would produce

Mere Apne and his younger son Raj, whom we called Daddu, would assist me. Raj Sippy went on to direct films.

N. C. Sippy ended the meeting by saying, 'Ye saari khichdi tum logon ne pakaayi hai. Mera naam mat lena' [Remember, all of you have cooked this up. Don't bring my name into it].

That is how I began directing. Because of my experience of writing scripts, I knew what was involved in direction. Once you understand how to make an omelette you have to break the eggs, don't you?

NMK: Yes, indeed!

Knowing that your first love was literature, were you ever keen to adapt a novel or short story to the screen?

G: K. A. Abbas's short story 'The Thirteenth Victim' fascinated me. It first appeared in the English magazine *Imprint*, and I wanted to read the original Urdu version, so I went to see Abbas Saaheb at his apartment on the ground floor of the Philomena Lodge in Juhu. He told me the Urdu title of the story was 'Dil Hi To hai'.

I managed to read his story and liked it very much. I told Romu Sippy about it and he immediately said we should make it into a film. I confessed to him that I had been thinking on the same lines, but we first needed to clear the story rights from Abbas Saaheb.

Romu spoke to his father who asked me to write a film treatment. Sippy Saaheb was quite thrilled with what I had written and said, 'Let's go and see Abbas Saaheb right now.'

As Sippy Saaheb held his meetings very early in the mornings, this conversation took place around 6 a.m. We went to Juhu and found that abbas Saaheb had just left for the airport and was on his way to Delhi. In typical Sippy Saaheb fashion, we rushed to the airport. There were no security issues at that time, so we bought two-rupee entrance tickets and hurried into the passenger hall.

We found Abbas Saaheb and N. C. Sippy immediately gave him five thousand rupees in an envelope, saying it was a token amount towards the story rights. Abbas Saaheb was astonished, 'I'll be back in two days. What's the hurry?' Sippy Saaheb insisted, 'Please keep it. We'll discuss the rest later. I want to make a film based on your story.' Abbas Saaheb put the envelope in his pocket and boarded his flight to Delhi.

Some time later I met Abbas Saaheb again and he said, ‘I have never met a producer like n. C. Sippy—imagine a producer who pays at once! Most producers don’t even bother to clear rights.’ That was n. C. Sippy’s greatest quality. He was so honourable. He was the best producer I have ever met.

I made *Achanak* [1973] based on ‘Dil Hi To Hai’. It did not have any songs. Songs would not have worked in the story. We released the film at the Regal and Eros cinemas that usually screened English-language films. Because *Achanak* was not a very long film, a documentary and a short film were shown before the interval and then the film played. Only n. C. Sippy had the guts to release the film in an unconventional way.

When the film came out, Abbas Saaheb wrote a page-long review in the Indian magazine *Screen*. He praised it highly.

NMK: Did you see him after that?
G: A very old friend Bhushan Sabarwal lived on the fourth floor of Philomena Lodge and Abbas Saaheb lived on the ground floor. Sabarwalji worked at air India and used to write poetry under his pen name ‘Rahi,’ so we called him Rahi Saaheb. I was shooting *Libaas*[1988] with Shabana Azmi, Utpal Dutt and naseeruddin Shah in Rahi Saaheb’s flat, so we would make our way up to the fourth floor every day.

One day Abbas Saaheb sent me a Ghalib couplet written on a piece of paper, and it read:

> Pinas mein guzarte hain jo kooche se vo mere
> Kandha bhi kahaaron ko badalne nahin dete
>
> [in a palanquin she swiftly passes through my street
> Not even allowing the bearers to change shoulders]

We read his beautiful note and Shabana said we had to pay our respects to abbas Saaheb before we started filming. So that’s what we did. When he was at home, we would greet him before heading upstairs.

On location for Libaas, *released in 1988.*

NMK: What a beautiful couplet.

There was a 1963 film called *Dil Hi To Hai* with Raj Kapoor and nutan, which clearly bears no relation to K. A. Abbas's story.

You have seen Indian cinema change since the late 1950s. Why do you think there were so few women working in the movies besides, of course, the actresses? Were there, for example, any female lyricists you know of?

G: A handful. O. P. Nayyar's wife, Saroj Mohini Nayyar wrote the famous 'Preetam aan milo' [Beloved, come to me]. The singer and actress Ila Arun has written songs and composed music for a few films. Rani Malik's work in *Aashiqui* became very popular. The stage artist Maya govind wrote songs with Laxmikant–Pyarelal. The composer Usha Khanna had a huge hit in *Dil Deke Dekho*[1959], but didn't get many films after that.

It was not the era for women to work behind the camera. Even the idea of women acting in films was initially frowned upon by society. A female technician would have also had to face the prejudice of male technicians: 'Who would take directions from a woman?' The male ego could be a factor. There was no Indira Gandhi working behind the camera. *[smiles]*

NMK: What about Nargis's mother Jaddan Bai? Was she not a composer and film director?

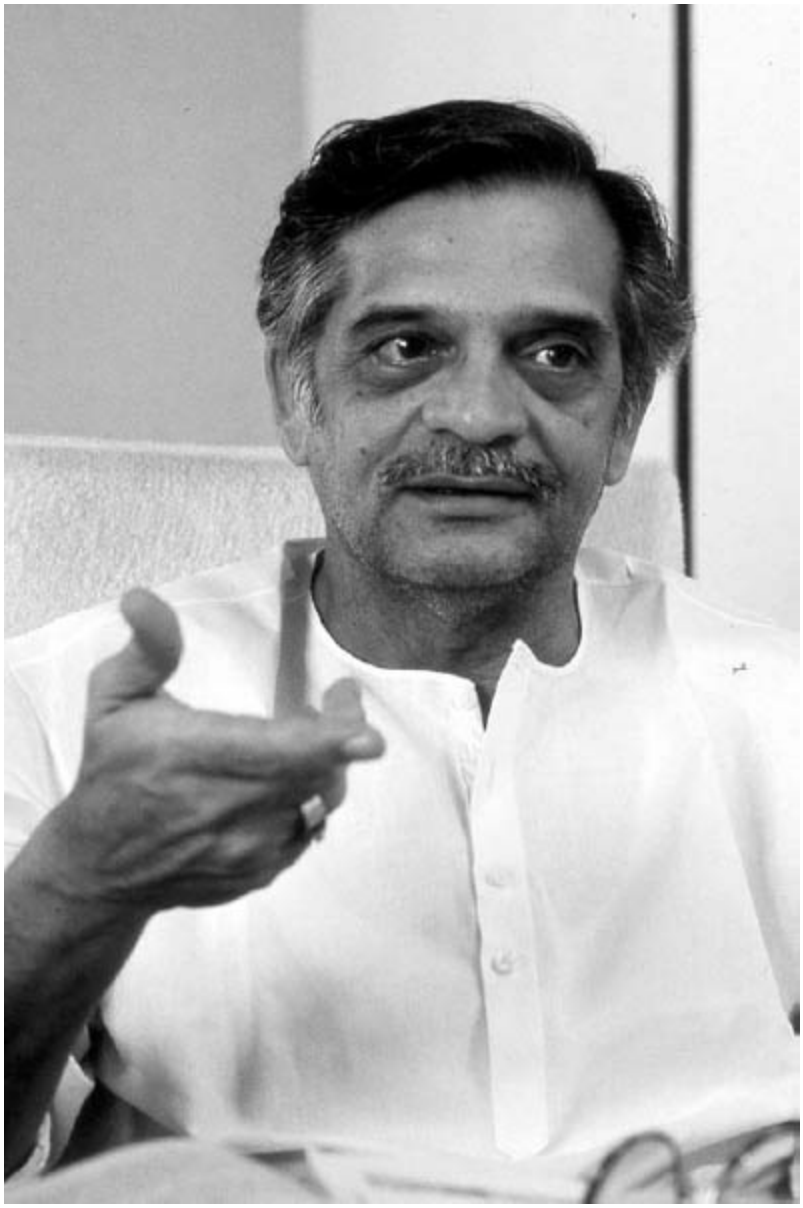
G: Yes, she was very prominent in her field. But she entered films as a singer and actress. I am not sure about her role as a technician.

Women technicians began working regularly in hindi cinema almost ten years after the Film institute at Pune opened in 1960. I am thinking of the film editor Renu Saluja who worked in the 1970s and ’80s. She was very good. now there are many women editors.

Even the choreographers in the past were male. Master Satyanarayan, Lachhu Maharaj, Gopi Krishna, Hiralal and P. L. Raj choreographed most film dances.

NMK: Hindi cinema’s leading choreographers are women now, thanks to the success of Saroj Khan and Farah Khan.

G: I must tell you a small incident involving Saroj Khan. She was working on a film at Mehboob Studios while I was shooting the song ‘Mere ishq mein laakhon latke, balam zara hatke’ [Loving me will not be a smooth ride, beloved, beware] for *Mausam* in 1975. We needed a dance move for Sharmila Tagore who was performing the song on the screen and I happened to see Saroj Khan outside my set and said, ‘I do not usually use a choreographer, but we need a few dance moves for a song…a few jhatkas.’ ‘Why not? I’ll do it,’ was her immediate reply.



In his office at Boskyana in 1990. Photograph: Peter Chappell.

Saroj Khan's contribution to this film has never been mentioned and I am glad we have talked about it. It is good to give credit where credit is due.

NMK: Hollywood actors or their agents read a script before saying yes to a film while Indian actors hear a narration of the screenplay. When you were directing, would you have preferred the actors to read the screenplay?
G: Narrating is far better. Reading a bound script can be unsatisfactory. The actors cannot guess the tone of the film. Some lines may even come across as

grammatically wrong. A script must be narrated to bring out the undertones and emotions. When I read a screenplay to the actors, I can feel they are taking in the atmosphere and mood. It ultimately leads to a good performance.

NMK: The actors must have loved hearing you say the lines with your great experience of reciting poetry in mushairas. Your dialogue delivery must have been very emotive.

Location filming of Mausam *released in 1975*.

G: I have never recited at a mushaira. *[laughs]*

NMK: Oops!
G: I have recited at various literary events. But I think the kind of mushaira you are talking about is a gathering of poets who recite their verse in turn. I did participate in a mushaira of that kind, but that was only once recently.

NMK: Were you ever tempted to do so before?
G: Serious poetry is not—or I should say no longer—recited in a mushaira. at least it is not the kind of poetry that I like.

I was once talking to Javed Saaheb about this and he said, ‘good! You didn’t fall into that trap.’ But Javed Saaheb and I did once end up together in

a mushaira in Lucknow.

NMK: You wrote the screenplay and dialogue, and were in control of the language, but actors have to interpret your words—how they perform and deliver the lines depends on their skill. Did you find working with actors frustrating?

G: A director does not completely own the medium of film. Directors are dependent on many people. Filmmaking is all about handling people; handling machines is much easier. You can change a camera lens or decide on a different trolley movement. A team is made up of very different individuals and you need to encourage all of them to believe in the concept of the film. That is not always easy.

Communicating clearly with actors is crucial. actors need to show the emotions back to you. The way they interpret the scene is never exactly how you had imagined it, but the audience's reaction depends on the performance. It is the actor who makes the emotional connection.

Every now and then you come across an actor who makes the scene far better than you had planned. This can happen by chance or improvisation. I am thinking of Sanjeev Kumar and Jaya Bhaduri in *Koshish* [1972]. They added so much to the film. They were way ahead of their time.

NMK: Were you good at convincing the actor to play the scene in the way you wanted?

G: I used to think I was. I acted out the scenes, spoke the lines and showed the movement. Even Shabana Azmi would ask me to perform the scene for her again and again.

NMK: Do you think actors need a mirror? Were they in fact mirroring you?

G: I don't know how to explain; perhaps they were absorbing what I wanted of them. You need to convince the actor that a scene can be played in a particular way. not every director works like that, but I was fortunate to have observed Bimal Roy and learned something of his technique.

I remember Meena Kumari would make me sit by her side and ask me to read the scene to her while we were making *Mere Apne*. She would close her eyes and listen intently. It felt as though she was internalizing the tone of the scene. It is essential that actors get the tone of a scene.

NMK: That's the reason why I add your reactions such as 'he smiles' or 'we laugh' to our text, so the reader has a sense of the tone of our conversation. Without it, some of your answers may sound very serious when you meant the comment lightly.

Many directors have to fight their corner when making a film. Was this your experience?

G: That's an experience shared by most filmmakers.

Jeetu [Jeetendra] was the producer and star of *Parichay* [1972]. 'Beeti na bitaayi raina' was the first song we recorded for the film, but he did not like it.

In *Parichay*, Sanjeev Kumar plays a character who was forced to leave his home and family because of his passion for classical music—when a man who has suffered for the sake of his art teaches his daughter how to sing—what else would he teach her but a semi-classical song like 'Beeti na bitaayi raina'?

But Jeetu did not like the song and asked my assistant Bhushan Banmali what would happen if he got someone else to write a song to replace it—what would gulzar do? Bhushan Banmali did not hesitate for a second and said, 'he won't direct your film. he'd leave at once.' So Jeetu did not put the question to me.

The day we were filming 'Beeti na bitaayi raina,' Amitabh Bachchan happened to drop by. He was sitting in his car and Jeetu played the song to him. Jeetendra is really a very honest boy because he came straight over to me accompanied by Amitabh and said, 'Amitabh had tears in his eyes when he heard the song.'

Jeetu was finally convinced the song would be a hit. 'Beeti na bitaayi raina' went on to win the national award for Lata Mangeshkar and Bhupendra Singh.

NMK: In 1996, you made *Maachis*, a powerful film about the rise of extremism following the anti-Sikhs riots of 1984. The message of the film is deeply pacifist. Did this film have anything to do with your sisters' suffering in the anti-Sikh riots that followed Indira Gandhi's assassination?

G: I was concerned about what was happening in the country. The problem of individuals did not compel me to make *Maachis*. I was deeply moved by the human tragedy unfolding around me.

I also think about the children in Afghanistan today and what they must suffer. A ten-year-old Afghani child has known nothing but war and conflict. These children do not know that a world exists beyond their violent reality. Wars are pushing people back to the Stone age. I wrote a short story called 'The Stone age' on this tragic situation.

NMK: *Maachis* was very well appreciated for many reasons and also became famous for the excellent 'Chappa chappa charkha chale.' it's such an unusual song.

G: Lohri is a festival celebrated in January in various parts of north India. it's a very popular festival in the Punjab, announcing the end of winter and the beginning of summer.

In *Maachis*, the young heroes sing this song in remembrance of happier times. Vishal Bhardwaj, who was writing the film score, gave me a tune. When I heard it, I thought his tune had to have words with strong phonetics.

Out of affection, I call Vishal's wife Rekha 'chatkhori'. The word describes someone who loves spicy food. So I wanted words sounding a bit like 'chatkhori' to match Vishal's tune and came up with 'Chappa chappa charkha chale'.

Talking of *Maachis*, I must tell you about Sudesh Syal who organized the whole shoot of the film in the mountains of Himachal and that too in deep winter. It is unusual to make close friend late in life and he is among those special friends whom I met in my forties. It is impossible that I do not see him if I am in Delhi. I call him my personal chief minister in a city full of ministers!

NMK: Do you see a close connection between your life and the films you have directed?

G: You can't attach every life experience to what you create. Only certain elements from the personal reflect in your work.

Bosky once asked me why almost all my films have a dilapidated house in some scene or the other. It was an unconscious thing, but she was right. I don't know why I like old monuments and ruins.

I loved visiting Baz Bahadur Palace in Mandu. Whenever I have travelled to Delhi by car, I have always stopped there. Mandu has many more tourists now. It was once a solitary kind of a place and spending a night or two there

in a small guest house made me happy.

I was not aware that my appeal for such places had any connection with the decaying houses in my films, but when Bosky pointed it out to me, I found similar imagery in my poetry as well.

It wasn't as if I had never owned a home of my own and therefore longed for one. I think it comes from something more abstract, unconnected to bricks and mortar. Perhaps it is my fascination with history.

NMK: I saw some images on the net of Baz Bahadur Palace and Roshanara's tomb and thought they looked alike. Perhaps the Mandu palace reminded you of your childhood when you must have spent time playing in the gardens of the Roshanara Bagh.

G: Maybe that's true.

Happiness is fleeting because our moods change. When you feel a sense of peace and inner satisfaction, it can make you feel happy. Talking to you now and knowing I have learned how to use Skype makes me happy. It may seem ordinary to someone who is twenty years old and for whom Skype is no big deal, but to learn it at my age feels special. It feels like an accomplishment. Shouldn't it make me happy?

NMK: Absolutely. I must say I was a bit surprised when you told me you could use Skype. It just shows how wrong assumptions can be. You were talking about mood changes, do you believe you are even-tempered?

G: I believe all of us have a core temperament. But mood and temperament are different things. Temperament is a combination of personality and attitude, and moods are lived moments. Our days are filled with moods that keep changing according to the moment. You may be reading the papers in one mood and a friend drops in and your mood changes.

NMK: Lataji once said you are stubborn. Why did she say that?

G: She was right. I can be stubborn when it comes to my convictions and knowing, for example, what works in a song or film. Lataji was perhaps thinking about the time when I was directing *Lekin* [1990] for her, and was not keen to make changes late into the production of the film.

When I initially gave Lataji the screenplay, I told her, 'Didi, I may not be able to say no to you later, so please decide whether the script needs any

changes. All suggestions are welcome at this point. It will be too late to change scenes later.' I was being sincere with her.

I would not have been able to make the films I wanted to make if I wasn't a stubborn man. no one would have produced them. Just think of the subjects I chose— *Koshish, Achanak, Maachis* and *Aandhi* —they were not commercial subjects or light romances.

Lataji is a sincere person and I know she understood my reasons. I once told you her sincerity came through her singing. You can even sense her smile when she sings.

NMK: You also once told me in an interview that people always believe her, and if she sings, 'Chaandni raatein, pyar ki baatein' (Moonlit nights, words of love), we believe it is indeed a moonlit night.
G: Yes. *[laughs]*

NMK: I am curious to know why you stopped directing? Especially when you had made a number of very successful and critically acclaimed films.
G: You know writers often imagine they can fill the chasm between the written word and the final film. But once you direct a film, you realize this can never entirely happen. People who market the film can delete scenes or re-edit them—basically change the work.

The film has to depend on many art forms: photography, performance, music, etc., and so the final result rarely matches the original idea. A book does not suffer the same fate. What you imagine can be brought alive through words and the words on the page are largely unaltered.

Location filming of Angoor, *released in 1982.*

I had a lot of books in my head and still do. I have a limited number of years ahead of me, so I had to draw the line somewhere. That's why I decided to stop making films and return to literature from where I began.

NMK: Have you regretted your decision?
G: No, not at all. I am more at peace with myself. I still get offers to direct and usually say, 'Yes, one day…'

You certainly become famous making movies. You are everywhere. But how many times can you enjoy or care to see your photograph in a magazine or newspaper? You reach a saturation point; what then?

My last film *Hu Tu Tu* was released twelve years ago, in 1999. I have no regrets and I can say without the slightest hesitation that writing is far more fulfilling. It is a total commitment to a subject. A book is a statement of beliefs. And so is a poem.

NMK: When you began writing poetry all those years ago, what came easily to you?
G: Rhyming is the first stage. You need a rhyme to make it sound like poetry. The English poems we studied at school were in rhyme—we read Keats, Coleridge and others. Milton was a difficult poet. We had to memorize his poems and recite them in class. His rhymes have a wonderful sound to them.

You start by rhyming and then work away from rhyme to blank verse.

NMK: Do you prefer blank verse?
G: It gives me greater freedom. I think blank verse is closer to the way we think and express ourselves. Thoughts run free whereas rhyme binds. Ideas are harnessed if you are obliged to find a rhyming word at the end of every line. You need to force a word into your thoughts, even if it may not be the right word—you use it because it rhymes. With 'bird' you have 'curd'. *[we laugh]*

NMK: Considering you have been writing poetry for over sixty years now, how do you avoid repeating yourself? Especially when it comes to rhyme.
G: Unquestionably, rhymes can become formulaic. You're absolutely right, but not everyone is conscious of when and how formula sets in. This has been the plight of many poets.

People appreciate a certain kind of poem and the appreciation itself can limit the horizon of a poet. It might even encourage some poets to think, 'Ye to mera style hai. Isi style ke upar, ya isi metre ke upar kahein' [This is my style. I should continue writing in this style and metre].

You need to consciously break away from a set pattern of thinking. I usually get bored with a subject or a writing style and there's nothing more tedious than repeating oneself. That's how I try to avoid formula.

The change also happens within the text itself. There are some words like 'chaand' [moon] that I use a lot because I am drawn to its sound and tone, so I make sure to change the imagery when using it. But it isn't always necessary to change the tone of a poem because the tone reflects your taste and imagination.

Writing happens instinctively. The first word leads me to the second, the third and the fourth. The sound of 'ch' just flows from one word into the other and ultimately makes a line—'Chaand chura ke laaya hoon; chal baithein church ke peechhe'. [i have stolen the moon for you; come, let us sit and talk behind the church].

NMK: What other words appeal to you?
G: Words that have a musical sound. We are all drawn to certain sounds and words that evoke colour and tone in us. In your book *Talking Songs with*

Javed Akhtar, he spoke about words having colours. He is right. Words have different colours. But it is not a fixed rule. Because I think a word that might suggest the colour yellow to him may not suggest yellow to me. It's so subjective. We're constantly reacting to things that come from the dictionary of our subconscious.

NMK: Talking of words, when would you use 'ishq', 'prem' or 'mohabbat', when all these words mean the same thing—love?

G: It depends on the context. The word 'pyar' has been overused, especially in film titles and songs, and as a result it has lost its impact. A long time ago if someone said, 'Main tum se pyar karta hoon' [i love you], it carried weight and meaning. Now it sounds as banal as saying, 'What fine weather we're having.' Before 'pyar', the word 'mohabbat' was commonly used because Urdu was more prevalent in earlier films.

Take the song 'Mohabbat hi jo na samjhe vo zaalim pyar kya jaane' [The cruel one who does not understand love, how can she know what love is?] from the 1952 film *Parchhaiyan*. The song was written by noor Lucknavi and sung by Talat Mahmood. it's an interesting line because 'mohabbat' and 'pyar' are used in the same line and mean the same thing.

When the words 'mohabbat' and 'pyar' started to sound tired, the Persian word 'ishq' gained in popularity. Because we had not heard it as often, it made people think, 'ah, this love is serious!' *[we laugh]*

And when 'ishq' started sounding clichéd, the English word 'love' found its way into Indian film titles and some songs. Actually all the words for love have been overused. It's like a child playing with a toy zebra for years—you can still make out the zebra's face, but its stripes have long since faded.

It seems so easy for young people today to say 'I love you' to one another. There was a time if a mother overheard her daughter telling a young man 'I love you', it would have caused pandemonium in the family. That was our culture. It is no longer so. I believe the shift in attitude came from society and then entered films.

NMK: There is greater emphasis on friendship between a girl and a boy in today's Hindi cinema rather than on love. Love is seen to grow out of friendship.

G: That's a very good thing and we should not resist it.

Yet we can still appreciate the old ways of expressing love, as described in Ahmad Faraz's couplet: 'Ab ke hum bichde to shaayad kabhi khwaabon mein milein, jis tarah sookhe hue phool kitaabon mein milein.' [Now that we are parted, perhaps we shall meet again in a dream, like chancing upon pressed flowers in the leaves of a book].

What beautiful imagery! Such thoughts are not expressed these days. Although some people may still be moved by that kind of sentiment, but many would think it is ridiculous and outdated. Sensibilities change, and as a result, poetry changes.

NMK: I was reading your new book *Neglected Poems*. is the poem 'We were walking on either side of the road' a dialogue with god?
G: Yes. I was exploring the idea that god was saying something I could not hear because we were separated by the noisy traffic of faiths and rituals. I search for god but perhaps he hides from me. The poem is a description of my relationship with god.

I speak of God as 'vo' [he]. Anyone who reads the poem may think it is a romantic poem about two lovers who cannot meet.

In the English translation, you need to use the personal pronoun, he, she or it. And if 'he' has capital letters, you know the poem is referring to god. So it makes the poem explicit in an English translation.

NMK: How is the sense of the poem conveyed in Urdu?
G: 'Vo' [he, she or it] is not gender specific. So readers have the freedom to understand the poem in the way they will. If I were to say, 'god and I were walking on either side of the road,' the poetry is gone.

What a poem says on the surface is not all that it means. You have to unpick the lines and see the shadows of words. That's what makes it poetry, otherwise it would be prose. You usually have to be less ambiguous in prose, which is often an elaboration of thoughts; whereas in poetry, thoughts are usually compressed.

A poem has an element of mystery. You have to unravel that mystery. Of course it depends on every poet—how much they reveal, and how much they choose not to.

NMK: When you speak of a poem's mystery, do you give many clues to the

reader?

G: Sometimes, but I leave a lot to the reader. I am happy when people tell me they understand a poem and what it is trying to say. There are also many people who do not understand poetry.

Think of music—when you hear certain notes, some people can immediately recognize the raag that is being played. It depends ultimately on how familiar you are with music. Those who appreciate poetry have an understanding of the form itself.

NMK: are you ever taken aback when others recite your poetry? When they have personalized it and made it their own.

G: It is true the tone of a poem can change in recitation. But I like experiencing my poetry through the diction of another. It only disturbs me if the delivery has changed the meaning or emphasis of the poem.

Some actors have a real talent for reciting poetry. take, for example, the actor Yashpal Sharma. When he says, ‘Kabristaan se guzaro to aahista bolo’ [as you walk through the graveyard, speak softly], he lowers his voice and whispers the words in the right tone. The poet Kishore Kadam, whose pen name is Saumitra, also recites beautifully.

Sarcasm or irony can be greatly enhanced when reciting a poem like this:

Chipchipey doodh se nehlaate hain aangan mein
khada kar ke tumhein
Shahad bhi, tel bhi, haldi bhi, na jaane kya kya
Ghol ke sar pe landhaate hain gilasiya bhar ke
Auratein gaati hain jab tivra suron mein mil kar
Paon par paon laga ke khade rahte ho ek patharaai
si muskaan liye
Butt nahin ho to pareshaani to hoti hogi

> [Placed in the courtyard, they bathe You with sticky milk
> A mix of honey, oil and tumeric, who knows what else
> Pouring tiny glassfuls over Your head
> When the women sing together in shrill tones
> You stand with foot on foot, a frozen smile on your lips

These things must surely disturb, if You are more than an idol]

The poem is about Lord Krishna and his worshippers. The idea here is to explore whether the devotees have any effect on Krishna. Does it strain his ears if the women who sing devotional songs to him sing out of tune? Does the smoke from the priest's lamp irritate his eyes? The poem speaks of the way Lord Krishna stands almost stubbornly with one foot on the other. The poem asks—'if You are more than an idol, these things must surely disturb You.'

NMK: Yes, I can see how the tone in recitation would change the intention of the poem.

The other poem I found touching in your collection *Neglected Poems* was the one on the birth of your grandson.

G: I can never forget the painful delivery that my daughter had to go through —fourteen hours, that's more than a day. I was so scared for her.

No matter what a man might achieve, he can never create life, only a woman can do that. The man inside me tells me I am not privileged enough to endure this pain and give birth to life. Finally, a woman is akin to god because she creates life. She has created the world's population. There would be nothing without her.

NMK: I wish more people thought like you. it's a shame how women, half the world's population, have to still struggle for their rights.

Could we return to the kind of imagery you like and use?

G: Because the word 'chaand' appeals to me, I am attracted by the imagery of the moon. But I try and vary how I use it. For example:

Jab jab patjhad mein pedon se peele peele patte
Mere lawn mein aa kar girte hain
Raat ko chhat pe jaa kar main
Aakaash mein takta rehta hoon
Lagta hai kamzor sa peela chaand bhi shayad
Peepal ke sukhe patte sa
Lehraata lehraata mere lawn main aa kar utrega

[When the yellowing autumn leaves
Come falling on my lawn
I rush to the roof terrace at night
And stare keenly at the sky
Imagining that the fading yellow moon
Like the dry leaf of the peepal tree
Will gently come falling on my lawn]

I tried another variation in the *Mere Apne* song:

Roz akeli aaye roz akeli jaaye
Chaand katora liye bhikhaaran raat
Roz akeli aaye roz akeli jaaye

[Comes alone each night, goes alone each day
The impoverished night with a crescent begging bowl
Comes alone each night, goes alone each day]

We recorded the song—it was a lullaby. Meena Kumari fell critically ill and we could not picturize it on her. We kept waiting and hoping she would get better. We finally did not use it in the film, but it is on the album.

People criticized the lyrics, but Meenaji reassured me by telling me, 'Write the way you feel. You cannot feel the way others feel so they should allow you to express yourself in the way you want.' That was all she needed to say.

NMK: It is widely known that Meena Kumari left her poems in your safekeeping. Did she want them published?

G: No, she didn't, but she was very keen to feel like a poet. She published some of her poems through Idris Dehlvi of Shama Publications. But I know many people had reworked them. Even Kamaal amrohi and his brother Raees amrohi helped her write in metre because she did not usually write in metre. Kamaal Saaheb believed poetry had to have metre and rhyme otherwise he did not consider it poetry. This was not the time of the azaad nazm [free verse]. Since I knew Meenaji well, I could tell her poems had moved away from her personal expression.

Some day I intend to publish a small book of her notes so we can see the beauty and depth of her thoughts. her notes are poetic but are not written in the form of a poem. I have her diary as well. People imagine there's something scandalous in it, but there is nothing of the sort. I have published excerpts from it in *Sarika*, the hindi magazine edited by the celebrated fiction writer Kamleshwar.

NMK: I cannot imagine when you will have the time to publish her poetry with the many books you're working on. But I must say it would be interesting to read more of Meena Kumari's work some day.

Many poets have written on time. is it a recurring subject in your poetry?

G: I have tried to define time in some poems and in the song 'Aane waala pal jaane waala hai.' [The approaching moment is about to pass].

I wrote a poem on the lines of—'The thing that ticks and is tied to my wrist is a watch and is not time. time cannot be tied to a wrist.'

You can think of many kinds of time—historical time, hours in the day, the entire growth of civilization, etc. It is not easy to define it. Years ago I wrote a poem for Bosky about not seeing time come and go but settle in one place— in my daughter who is now eighteen years old.

NMK: I must tell you an interesting story. When I was making a documentary on Shah Rukh Khan in 2005, and because he is often late, I asked him, 'What does time mean to you?' he said, 'time starts when I get there.'

G: [*laughs*]

NMK: I thought it was a most unusual answer.

How important do you think is it to keep pace with the changing times?

G: You're left behind if your work does not reflect change. I would like my writing to speak of the history unfolding around me—literature must be a record of its time. Using today's idiom is therefore a natural choice for me.

I often hear people say, 'Oh, those charming old days when we sat under the peepal tree and the corn on the cob vendor would pass by. We bought some corncobs, salting them; we ate them with great relish. Then we lay down on the charpai [a bed with a wood frame strung with string], and fell asleep under the swaying branches of the tree.'

People feel nostalgic, but this is not nostalgia. They are just recalling a moment in time when they felt alive. And that's what it should remain—a memory of the self in another time.

Through words I can give them the peepal tree, the corn on the cob and the charpai, but that moment from the past can never be retrieved, just as the reality of today cannot be wished away.

The way people relate to one another has also changed. That is why I use modern idiom to describe relations today.

> Tum se rukhsat lete waqt
> Jab tum se haath milaaya
> Tumhaari aankhein nam thi
> Mere bhi aankhein nam thi
>
> [While leaving your side
> When we shook hands
> Your eyes were moist
> My eyes were moist]

Holding hands is not new in Urdu poetry, but the idea of shaking the beloved's hand is a gesture that belongs to the world today.

You know, I play tennis every morning and the very thought of an Urdu poet wearing shorts and playing tennis goes against the grain. Ye Urdu ke shaayar hain aur subah ye knickers pahen ke tennis kaise khelte hain? [An Urdu poet wearing shorts and playing tennis every morning? how can that be?]

NMK: I suppose it doesn't quite match the traditional image of an Urdu poet!
G: *[smiles]*

NMK: When you turned your energies from directing films to writing some twelve years ago, which was the first book that you published?
G: A collection of poems called *Raat Pashminey Ki*. Even while I was making films, I wrote short stories. I have written about a dozen books for children. If you want to communicate with children, you have to learn their language. It is far easier for me to write for adults. Their language is no

different from mine.

Most children's books in India are translations from the English. There is so little original writing for children here. I believe Bengal, Kerala and Maharashtra are the only Indian states where books are specifically written for children. Satyajit Ray's father, Sukumar Ray, was a genius at writing children's stories.

Besides traditional folk tales, as far as I know, there are no children's books in Urdu, Punjabi or hindi. And if they do exist, they are written in an old fashioned, textbook language. The writing has to be playful to engage children.

As Bosky grew older, I discovered my vocabulary had to keep up with hers. Until Bosky was about thirteen, I used to write a book especially for her birthday every year. It had folk tales, stories in verse and poems. I had to learn how to write for a two-year-old, then a four-year-old, and so on.

My daughter has prepared the same kind of book for her son Samay. She will give it to him on his birthday. It makes me happy to know that she is continuing her father's tradition in this way.

NMK: It sounds like you enjoy the company of children.
G: I feel very happy when I spend time with children. I love spoiling them. They learn discipline at school, so why not spoil them at home?

On the first day my grandson Samay attended pre-school, I wrote a poem for him on these lines—'I used to think the winds were free to blow as they will, I used to think rivers are free to flow as they will. Son, the winds are directed by the oceans, the mountains bid the rivers to turn and twist. Discipline is for one and all. today is your first day at school.'

NMK: You have tried all forms of writing, including a biography of Ghalib. What is the key to writing a biography?
G: When you write poetry or a short story you can depend on imagination, but a biography means serious research. I spent about eleven years studying Ghalib's life and work. I read all his poetry and letters and many books on him. at one point, I was keen to make a biopic on Ghalib, but no one was interested in producing it. now I know it was a blessing in disguise. I don't think I could have succeeded in condensing his story into a three-hour film.

But I was lucky that I could make a television serial on Ghalib. It

happened just by chance. The Director general of Doordarshan, Mr a. S. Tatari, happened to see a letter I had written sometime earlier proposing a serial on Ghalib. So Mr tatari got in touch and asked if I was still interested in making the serial and of course, I said yes. The six-anda-half-hour serial had naseeruddin Shah in the lead. He was superb as Ghalib.

I think it was the best film work I have done. It was a dream come true for me.

NMK: What is a good biography in your view?
G: It must be more than a chronology of events in a person's life. It must tell you something about the period in which the subject lived and worked. That is the most challenging aspect, to situate your subject in the widest possible historical and social context.

When I wrote Ghalib's biography, I researched the period in which he lived—the fall of the Mughal Empire and the arrival of the British, the street protests in Delhi and the growing desire for freedom which led to the 1857 rebellion. I also wrote about Ghalib's contemporaries, some of whom were not concerned about the political turmoil of the time. But Ghalib was deeply troubled by what he was witnessing all around him.

His personal life was difficult. none of his seven children survived infancy. As a Muslim, he could have married again, but never considered it. He is known for his great humour and it helped him survive and endure his suffering. humour is like the breeze blowing through hard times.

NMK: Has your Ghalib biography been translated?
G: Yes, in English, Urdu and hindi. Very few people realize that I have been working. Even this interviewer doesn't know. That's a nice one on you!

NMK: Absolutely! I should have known better.

Can we talk about your short stories? What do you like about the form?
G: I have written more poetry than short stories. My short stories are about ten pages long. For me, a short story is like cutting a slice from life and placing it on a page. I want the reader to share the experience of that slice of life. A short story is another form of poetry for me.

NMK: You've written for so many years, I wonder if you ever suffer from

writer’s block?

G: I think all creative people, not just writers, get stuck and the ability to create can elude them momentarily. A painter friend of mine tells me that his creativity seems to dry up all of a sudden. I have known musicians who have experienced the same thing. it’s a natural phenomenon for any creative person. If we look at other professions, you will find, for example, that chefs get bored of cooking the same food. Everyone gets tired of doing the same thing every day.

But the question is how to overcome these feelings? When this happens to me, I use it as an opportunity to collect myself and look back at the work behind me. We often feel blocked because we’re stuck on a path that we cannot easily escape. Stagnancy comes from routine, so I make it a point to break with routine. In my shop, sometimes I make sweet things and sometimes salty. I might stop writing poetry for a while and write something for the theatre—involve myself with another medium.

NMK: What if you have to meet a deadline and deliver a song in two days?

G: I write the song in two days. You cannot always rely on mood and inspiration. at times you must rely on the skill and experience you have gained over the years. Craft comes to your rescue, and along with that there is a sense of commitment. But I am aware that the result is not the same, so if the film director can give me a bit more time, I ask for it. If it’s impossible, I meet the deadline.

NMK: Have you tried writing a novel?

G: I did try once. But it turned out to be a long short story. I found I could not stretch the idea. I stay very close to the theme of a single idea and this kind of approach to writing does not easily work at novel length.

I try to make my writing concise. You will not find many subplots and secondary characters even in my films. Every sequence flows like a single stream into the main river.

NMK: What kind of writing is the most satisfying?

G: Writing poetry. I can talk about the world around me—the beauty of nature, the struggles and the violence in the world. The discoveries we’re making in the cosmos is something I find fascinating though Indian poets

have largely ignored this subject. I regularly read about NASA's expeditions into space and find astronomy poetic.

I felt so dejected when Pluto was no longer regarded among the nine major planets. It hurt me. I identify with Pluto. It reminds me of my own place in the family. Sometimes I was a part of the family and sometimes removed from it.

My next collection of poems will be called 'Pluto'. all the poems will be very short—perhaps six or seven lines each.

NMK: I know you are translating Tagore's poetry, but have you also translated other poets? Was that an enjoyable experience?
G: Translating the poetry of Sukrita Paul Kumar has given me great pleasure.

She is a socially committed, learned and down-to-earth person. She writes in English and is the daughter of the well-known Urdu writer Joginder Paul. She was born and brought up in Kenya, yet her writing is so rooted in the Punjab. I told her that I found her poems had great vitality because they were so culturally rooted.

The poems described her grandmother cooking in a tandoor and tending to buffaloes. But describing an Indian village life in English words, and using 'buffalo' instead of 'bhains' sounded a bit odd to me. So I translated a few of Sukrita's poems and read them to her. She said, 'I think my poems have come home.' it was a beautiful remark, and when we published the book of translations, we decided to call it *Poems Come Home*. It seemed the perfect title.

NMK: Is there a lot of bad poetry out there?
G: Oh yes!

NMK: How would you define a bad poem?
G: Something written for the sake of writing. Or a poem based on a series of rehashed clichés, or thoughts imposed by the need to rhyme.

A poem must present fresh ideas in a fresh way. I am not a traditional admirer of god and don't like reading the same old imagery about god. When people say a leaf does not stir without god's bidding—i think to myself that god must have a very boring job.

Through Basu Bhattacharya, I met Arun Shevate, an excellent Marathi poet who became a good friend. He helped me enormously in selecting the poems I was keen to translate by the famous Marathi poet Kusumagraj who passed away in 1999. arun Shevate would ask me to use some weighty Urdu words in the translation because he thought they sounded impressive even if they only vaguely conveyed the meaning.

One of Kusumagraj's poems had a novel perspective on the subject of god that was most appealing.

The poet asks a gardener if he owns the trees. 'Mangoes fall to the ground, birds perch on the branches and yet you do nothing to shoo them away. Some complain the mangoes are sour and curse the tree and walk away. Yet you do nothing.'

The gardener answers, 'The pull of gravity will make the mangoes fall, and if some mangoes are sour, people are bound to curse.'

The poet asks again, 'have you no relationship at all with the tree?'

'Yes, I once did. When I created it, I watered it and looked after it. But now the tree has grown and does not need me. The sun and the rain nourish it. all I now have is the "saat baara" [the land deed]. I own the land but everything on it looks after itself.'

Kusumagraj was clearly talking about the relationship between the Creator and the world. to imagine god as the owner of a title deed is a new thought, even if it may be at odds with the thoughts and beliefs of some people.

NMK: You were telling me about a book you are compiling consisting three hundred and sixty-five poems—a poem a day. What are the poems like?

G: Free verse is today's idiom. Rhymes are more rare. You find them in children's poetry—making it easier for children to memorize the lines. But otherwise most of the poems that I have been reading are in free verse.

Unfortunately, I don't have the time to read all the poetry being written in some twenty languages in India, so this is an excellent way of discovering the work of poets from all over the country, including the northeast—Nagaland, Assam and Manipur.

Young people spend hours on the internet, they read novels and watch movies, but don't read much poetry. They have probably read the work of

Tagore and Ghalib at school, but their poetry does not seem relevant to young folk today. As a result, many believe poetry is principally about romance. I hope this book encourages young people to read contemporary Indian poetry and see it is a revelant subject and not just a pastime.

NMK: Through this compilation, you're also creating a platform for poets whom we might not have heard of.
G: Our knowledge of poetry is limited. Indian poets who write in the regional languages don't reach a wide readership, even though they talk of many important things—the Dalit movement, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the genocides taking place in some part of the world. They write about the environment, global warming and love.

Working on this anthology has given me the opportunity to learn more. I am not academically qualified. As you know, I had to leave college before graduating.

NMK: Do you regret not graduating?
G: My not having a degree does not bother me. But I regret not learning a way of thinking or method of approaching the study of a subject.

I think the advantage of a formal education is that it gives you a foundation and springboard. The springboard helps when you start your working life. I know it has taken me longer to achieve things, and to feel equal to people who have had a formal education. If I had graduated, I might have become a schoolteacher rather than needing to work in a motor garage. So I suppose years were wasted.

I used to avoid meeting a newspaper editor. an editor was a big deal for me. I felt awkward when I first met Sham Lalji, the editor of the Delhi edition of *The Times of India*. I was full of complexes. I didn't like talking in public either.

Many years later, I started playing badminton with Darryl D'Monte, the editor of *The Times of India* in Bombay. By then I had gained some confidence and could talk to him about many things. gaining confidence took time. A university education might have helped me to build that confidence a little sooner.

NMK: Being self-taught on the other hand can enhance drive and originality.

Do you think the personality of an artist informs the work?

G: Personality colours creativity. This is true of all artists, and the same applies to translators. You are in whatever you do and it cannot be avoided. If the sarod masters Ali Akbar Khan and Amjad Ali Khan play the same bandish, you can still hear musical differences. Even the pressure of their fingers on the instrument makes a difference.

NMK: When you meet someone for the first time, do you have a hunch about who they are? are you intuitive?

G: I think intuition is an accumulation of experience— intuition comes from your subconscious. That's what guides you. But intuition doesn't always work. You can still get deceived! Falling in love is intuitive.

NMK: People often say some translations of Indian literature are not as brilliant as they could have been. I have even heard people say that translation itself can never make a great impact. But when we think of world literature, most people outside of say, Russia, have in fact discovered magnificent writers like Dostoevsky through translation.

You have always loved translating. What is the most difficult thing about it?

G: Do you think it's easy? *[we laugh]*

It's scary translating a great writer like tagore. I am currently translating some of his poems into hindustani. I have chosen to work with the original poems in Bengali rather than his English versions.

Connotations and associations of words change with time. So it helps knowing Bengali—that way I can go back to the original poem. For example, when Tagore writes: 'Do not loiter over your toilet,' the word here refers to the process of dressing, and also the articles used for dressing as this is what 'toilet' meant in his times. So, it was the right word for then. But today the word has a totally different meaning.

NMK: What do you think of tagore's English translations?

G: I have spent a lot of time studying them. Tagore has changed certain lines, and even edited his poems quite drastically—sometimes to half their original length. I believe he did this to make them work for the Western reader.

I do not agree with some of his translations. As the author of his work, he

could take liberties, which another translator would not dare to do. But I think Tagore should have left the translations to someone else. It is a problem when you're both the author and translator because you have too much freedom to change the original. Every so often Tagore has been unjust to the original Bengali poem. But then the English translation is also his work. *[smiles]*

NMK: Which Tagore poem are you working on nowadays?
G: 'Your questioning eyes' from the collection *The Gardener*. This is Tagore's English version:

> Your questioning eyes are sad
> They seek to know my meaning
> As the moon would fathom the sea…

My hindustani translation:

> Samajh paati nahin ho tum mujhe, hai na
> Ta'ajjub se bhari aankhein tumhari poochhti hain
> Ki jaise chaand ek-tak dekhta hai ta'ajjub se samandar ko

The imagery is so beautiful and fresh. From my understanding of the nuances in the Bengali poem, I decided to use 'ta'ajjub' [amazement], so the line became 'ta'ajjub se bhari aankhein' [eyes filled with amazement], which has a different sense from the word 'fathom'.

If English had been the only language I had known, I might have translated 'fathom' as 'hairat se bhari aankhein' [eyes full of surprise].

NMK: Do you give complete freedom to your translators?
G: I must, otherwise the poems will not work in English. The result would not be poetry, only words. translation is more than understanding word meanings. You must look for the nuances and catch the shadow of words as they fall onto each other. What must come across in translation is the feeling of the poem because poems are about feelings rather than precise word meanings.

The best translations are aimed at the reader of the target language. If you're translating from hindi into English, your first priority has to be the

English reader. You have to humbly accept that some cultural gaps cannot be filled. however, when translating from Bengali to hindustani, the fact that the readers of both languages are culturally bound helps.

I know some translators use English as the link language when they are working between Tamil and Hindi because they don't necessarily speak Tamil.

NMK: Have you read your translations outside of India, I mean in an international context?
G: Pavan Verma has written an interesting study in sonnet form on Yudhisthira and Draupadi. I have translated it into hindustani, and we recently recited some extracts to a large audience in Singapore. The session was very well received.

I met Pavanji about five years ago when he was the Director of the ICCR [Indian Council for Cultural Relations]. He invited me to a conference on the subject of the Partition at Neemrana. Then I met him again at the Frankfurt Book Fair. He said he had read my poetry and wanted to translate some of my poems. He sent me a few examples of his translations and I said, 'Lovely. I will be honoured.' his translations are excellent. Despite the fact that he is our ambassador in Bhutan, he is also a prolific writer.

The Oriya poet and writer J. P. Das has also translated my poems into English in a book called *Autumn Moon*. Rina Singh was my first English translator. her book is called *Silences*.

NMK: Is there any particular poem of yours that you like reciting more than another?
G: There are some poems I like reciting a lot. But the choice of poem depends to a great degree on the kind of audience I am addressing, the venue and even the occasion.

NMK: Do you feel there is an element of performance when you recite a poem?
G: No. There is no performance. I recite the poem in exactly the same way as I would read it out loud to myself. The point is to communicate. I can usually sense the reaction of the audience and know if I am boring them.

NMK: When you are recording a poem for an album, do you ask for many retakes?

G: Not unless there is a technical problem. If I am recording a poem for a director who wants me to change the diction or put stress elsewhere then we go for another take. I recorded some poems for Salim Arif's play *Humsafar* and did whatever he wanted me to. When I direct myself, I listen to the take and usually know if the recitation works.

NMK: Your lyrics are the most widely known aspect of your work. You have been writing songs since 'Mora ang lai le' in 1961, and now you're working with Yash Chopra and a. R. Rahman. is this the first time you've worked with Yash Chopra?

G: Yes. As you know, he is an experienced filmmaker and a complete romantic. all his films are about love. He has grown up in poetry and was very close to Sahir Ludhianvi. Yashji still prefers melodies and romantic poetry and asks me, 'Kya vo khaandaani shaayari khatm ho gai?' [is it the end of traditional poetry?]

Traditions cannot last forever. The whole way of life has changed, so how can poetry remain the same?

NMK: What draws you to write lyrics for a film? is it the script, the director or composer?

G: It's always the script. I must know what I'm getting into. Many films have been offered to me recently, including something on the Babri Masjid and Godhra. If I feel the film will stir up communal conflict or discord, I stay away. If a film promotes communal harmony, which for me is beyond religion, I am happy to work on it because the film's premise is in line with my beliefs.

I am not interested in sex-oriented or violent films. A love story or a social subject with a sense of aesthetics appeals to me. I have played it safe and it has saved me many times.

NMK: It's heartening to hear that commercial reasons do not determine your decision.

G: A hit film is not the objective.

NMK: What sort of compromises do you need to make when writing lyrics?
G: I call them constraints rather than compromises.

When I write a poem, I do not have to worry about using a higher Urdu vocabulary because I know the reader knows Urdu well. In film lyrics, I avoid Persianized words because they are not widely understood.

Lyrics are not read but heard and seen in a film. If you're reading a poem, you can underline a word you don't understand, but when you see the song on the screen or hear it playing, there is nothing you can do.

Of course if you have the album, you can replay the song if the words aren't clear to you. But basically the Indian film song is a cinema experience and its aim is to appeal to the largest possible audience. Therefore I am obliged to use a kind of middle-of-the-road language.

NMK: How do you go about writing a song?
G: I usually write words on the metre of the tune. It could be the other way round, and the composer will write the tune based on my words and metre.

The context in which the song appears in the story is of key importance. Does the song enhance the story in some way? Does it add another dimension to the screen character? The lyrics should match the vocabulary a character uses in dialogue. If the hero is an Urdu speaker, you can't introduce Sanskritized hindi into the lyrics.

I wrote a song in *Satya*, a gangster film, for a character who is a violent man, a man who listens to no one and shoots people who contradict him or come in his way. He decides to sing a song when he is drunk. The gangster cannot sing a Ghalib ghazal like 'Dil-e-naadaan, tujhe hua kya hai' [O innocent heart, what has come over you?] how can he express sentiments like that? So what will he sing? 'Goli maar bheje mein, bheja shor karta hai' [Shoot a bullet through my head. My head is full of turmoil].

So here the song aims to give us an insight into the psychology of the character and tells us something about the way he thinks.

NMK: Indian cinema has always had songs since the coming of sound in 1931. What do you think attracts people to a song? is it the words or the tune?
G: The tune. That's what stays in your mind. When the tune starts galloping, you need reins to hold on to it. The words become useful there. They are the reins that allow you to ride the horse.

I believe words should amaze or amuse. Only then will the listener want to understand the meaning of the song.

NMK: Does the location of the song have an effect on the vocabulary of the lyrics?
G: It doesn't affect the vocabulary but the imagery. If a song is filmed indoors, you cannot describe a cascading waterfall. And if the song is filmed in the valleys of Kashmir or Scotland, the imagery cannot describe the desert of Rajasthan.

You also have to provide images that match the time of day when the song appears in the film. If the song is shot in sunlight, using the imagery of the moon will clearly not work at all.

NMK: I have always felt that lyricists subtly impose the location of a song.
G: Yes, and in many cases you could say the songwriter also determines the appropriate time when the song should be filmed. He is required to provide the visual context through his words.

Mani Ratnam, whom I call Mani sir, is the only director who asks me for abstract imagery. That's why the songs I write for him are so different. Plus, a. R. Rahman is the one composing the music. Think of *Dil Se* and the way Mani sir has picturized the songs. So imaginatively done! he is a wonderful man. For me, working with Mani sir and Rahman is like celebrating Eid.

By the way, Mani Ratnam sent me a text yesterday saying he was working on a tamil film and was missing me. It was very sweet of him to text me. So I wrote back, 'I am missing you, too. Please include a hindi song in your tamil film. If it doesn't work in the script, then let the song play during the interval.' *[laughs]*

NMK: He is among India's best directors today. I know many people did not like his last film *Raavan*, but I found it very interesting and unusual.
G: So did I. I have not seen the kind of visuals that *Raavan* had in any other Indian film. I am very fond of it.

The other film I like is Aparna Sen's *36 Chowringhee Lane* with Jennifer Kendal. If I had to choose a favourite Bengali movie, with due respect to Manekda [Satyajit Ray], it would be aparna Sen's film.

Manekda is of course India's most complete director in every sense—his Apu trilogy is magnificent. You learn so much by watching his films. They are an education, but education and experience are different things. Watching *36 Chowringhee Lane* is an experience for me. It is like a beautiful short story.

NMK: I find many of your songs have an element of storytelling. is it because you are first and foremost a writer?
G: I think it is because I directed films. Problems arise when lyricists don't participate in the process of the film, and they must. Lyrics are a part of the film text. But some lyricists are known to only ask questions like, 'Do you need a duet? a solo? is it an indoor or an outdoor song?' That's hardly enough, is it?

I don't want to sound as if I am pointing fingers, but it is important to participate in the whole process otherwise all the songs will sound the same, even if different characters are to sing them.

I have always believed that Shailendra was the best lyricist of hindi cinema. I know he was actively involved in the films he worked on and knew filmmaking very well. He shaped his songs to suit the characters and through his lyrics, added other dimensions to the story. This would not have been possible without his complete understanding of the characters, the screenplay's subtext, the scenes and locations.

NMK: Yes. His *Shree 420* song 'Mera joota hai japaani' is not only an exceptional song but gives us an immediate sense of the hero's character. In an interview you once gave me, you said Shailendra's Marxist thinking was present in the lines: 'Honge raaje raajkanvar, hum bigade dil shehzaade, hum singhaasan par jaa baithe jab jab karein iraade' (There may be kings and rulers, but we are carefree princes too and sit upon the throne when the mood takes us).

You explained this couplet suggested that it was the people, through their votes, who could ultimately make or break governments.
G: That's right. 'Dil ka haal sune dilwala' [Only the large-hearted feel the plight of others] is another example of a song that speaks on behalf of the common man. Raj Saaheb knew Shailendra's songs were true to the theme of *Shree 420* and perfectly matched his character, Raju.

NMK: What about Sahir Ludhianvi? Did he work closely with the screenplay?

G: In a more limited way than Shailendra. If the song situation was explained to him, he would write songs that perfectly fitted the story, like, ‘Jo bore kare yaar ko us yaar se tauba’ [god save us from boring friends], ‘Vo subah kabhi to aayegi’ [Will that new dawn ever break?] from the film *Phir Subah Hogi*, or *Pyaasa*’s ‘Sar jo tera chakraaye’ [if your head is reeling].

I don’t think Sahir Saaheb ever read film scripts. I always felt Sahir Ludhianvi was a poet who was embraced by the cinema, but did not embrace the cinema in return.

NMK: He had great skill to say complex things in an effortless way. I am thinking of the song ‘Abhi na jao chhod kar,’ it explores through conversation the many dimensions of love in a seemingly breezy manner and yet it is so profound.

I find it intriguing that so many composers whose mother tongue was not hindi or Urdu have so skilfully managed to find the right tune to match the words. how did they do it?

G: You do not have to know the nuances of language to grasp the phonetics. Word meanings can be explained. I don’t think many composers with whom I have worked knew Urdu very well, except for Khayyam Saaheb and Madan Mohanji. I worked with Khayyam Saaheb on *Thodisi Bewafaii* and on *Mausam* with Madan Mohanji.

I did not have the chance of working with Naushad Saaheb. I know he enjoyed writing poetry and even wrote a book of poems.

NMK: What made you decide to rework the Ghalib line ‘Jee dhoondhta hai’ in the *Mausam* song?

G: I wanted to expand on the premise of the couplet, to imagine the state of mind that seeks days gone by. I also wrote a poem inspired by a line of Mus’hafi—‘Tere kooche is baahaane humein din se raat karna, kabhi is se baat karna, kabhi us se baat karna.’ The line means—‘From morning to night I spend in your lane on some pretext or the other—sometimes talking to this passer-by and sometimes taking to the other.’

Based on Mus’hafi’s couplet, the poem that I wrote describes the different pretexts used to linger in the vicinity of the beloved.

NMK: What an interesting way of paying tribute to the great poets of the past, while creating a new work.

You have written songs with many composers, how do you deal with creative differences?

G: I had a minor difference with Khayyam Saaheb because he wanted me to change a line in a song. But I felt I must have the freedom to choose my words. If I didn't have that choice then what was I doing as a lyricist?

NMK: Do you feel the older generation of lyricists had to change their writing style as time passed?

G: Majrooh Sultanpuri is a good example. You can hear a poet's imagination coming through his choice of words in the song 'Gham diye mustaqil kitna naazuk hai dil ye na jaana, haaye haaye ye zaalim zamaana' [The cruel world inflicted repeated blows on my fragile heart]. This wonderful song sung beautifully by K. L. Saigal is from the 1946 film *Shahjehan*. To think that Majrooh Saaheb could use a word like 'mustaqil' [everlasting] in the first film song he wrote!

He also knew how to adapt to the changing trends in cinema language and with equal confidence could write, 'C. a. t. cat maane billi' for *Dilli ka Thug* [1958].

NMK: Can you give me an example of changing expressions in your songs?

G: Take the lines in 'Kajrare' from *Bunty aur Babli* by Shaad ali. twenty years ago people would not express their thoughts in this way:

> Aankhen bhi kamaal karti hain
> Personal se sawaal karti hain
>
> [Eyes like yours do amazing things
> Asking such personal questions]

When we initially discussed 'Kajrare,' we thought the song could be filmed in a dhaba [roadside café] where long distance trucks halt. That is why the opening couplet has lines in the style of the inscriptions painted on the back of lorries. The police officer, Dashrath Singh, played by Amitabh, is waiting in the dhaba to arrest the thieves, Bunty and Babli. Dashrath Singh,

who has never seen Bunty, is busy talking to a man and does not realize the man is none other than Bunty himself.

When Aishwarya Rai agreed to make a guest appearance and perform the song, the location of the dhaba was changed. She was fantastic and the song was a great hit.

NMK: The variety of your songs is impressive. You use modern idiom and earthy folk expressions from UP with equal ease. I am thinking of 'Beedi jalai le'.

G: The character Billo [Bipasha Basu] who performs the song in *Omkara* does not speak without using a cuss word. So her song could not be in chaste Urdu. It had to have a colloquial and irreverent touch.

'Beedi' works on two levels—Billo's dance is intercut with a love scene that is crucial to the story.

NMK: The song is performed in such a sexual and sensuous way that the words take on another meaning, even if they weren't meant to.

G: I suppose that is why 'Beedi jalai le' and 'Kajrare' became such great hits. I don't think the songs in themselves would have made such an impact otherwise.

'Kajrare' became a rage thanks to aishwarya. I know many people who would show the film to their friends just to watch her dance.

NMK: If you don't like a song situation, do you ask the director to change it?

G: No, that's the director's prerogative. If I have a suggestion about the placement of the song, we discuss it. Exchanging ideas with the creative team is part of the process.

NMK: Your song 'Chal chhaiyyan chhaiyyan' is one of the most famous Indian film songs ever. In the West, it is referred to as the train song. Farah Khan, who choreographed it brilliantly, said it has become the defining song, a kind of anthem, for Shah Rukh, Rahman and herself.

G: There's a funny story circulating on the net. I believe, in Indonesia, a young policeman in full uniform filmed himself singing the song. He became a star on Youtube. Apparently the police department objected to the man singing in uniform. Over two million people on the net gave their support to

him and in the end the officer performed ‘Chal chhaiyyan chhaiyyan’ in front of a big live audience.

NMK: Thanks to the net many old Indian film songs are also enjoying a new lease of life. You can find rare songs uploaded on Youtube. it’s wonderful for researchers.

The standard practice in most Indian films has been to have at least five songs. So the situations in which they appear have become predictable. how do you avoid writing formulaic songs for formulaic situations?

G: I try and adopt an unusual approach. In the 1981 film *Naram Garam*, I wrote the song: ‘Mere chehre mein chhupa hai meri ma ka chehra’ [My mother’s face is hidden in my face].

We have many songs describing a girl’s face—her beautiful eyes or her flowing hair. But the heroine does not usually sing about how much she resembles her mother. In this story, she happens to be talking about her mother who has died. So this gave a new twist to a formulaic song and situation. One can always try and avoid predictable lyrics.

NMK: I can see an interesting link between some of your songs and your fascination for Sarat Chandra Chatterjee’s novels. I mean in the way that your songs and his novels speak of family relations.

G: Yes, that’s true. This is an aspect of how I write songs and how I approached screenplay writing.

NMK: Some of your lyrics also sound like conversations.

G: T. S. Eliot once said the best form of poetry, especially when talking of blank verse, is when it reaches the level of conversation and talks to you. I like songs that say something in a natural way and express feelings effortlessly.

NMK: You have won many awards for your lyrics, including *Filmfare*’s Best Lyricist award in 1984 for the beautiful song ‘Tujhse naaraaz nahin zindagi’ from *Masoom*.

G: You know how *Masoom* was made? it was Shekhar Kapur’s first film. He used to act at one time and had worked in a film with Shabana Azmi. So one day Shabana told me Shekhar was planning to direct a film and wanted me to

write the screenplay and songs. Shekhar came to see me and narrated the story of ‘Man, Woman and Child’.

NMK: Isn’t that the novel by Erich Segal, which was made into a Hollywood movie in 1983?
G: That’s right. Shekhar told me about the novel and I had liked the idea. The hollywood film had not been released at that point in time and he asked me if I wanted to read the novel. I said I preferred to first adapt the story into an Indian context.

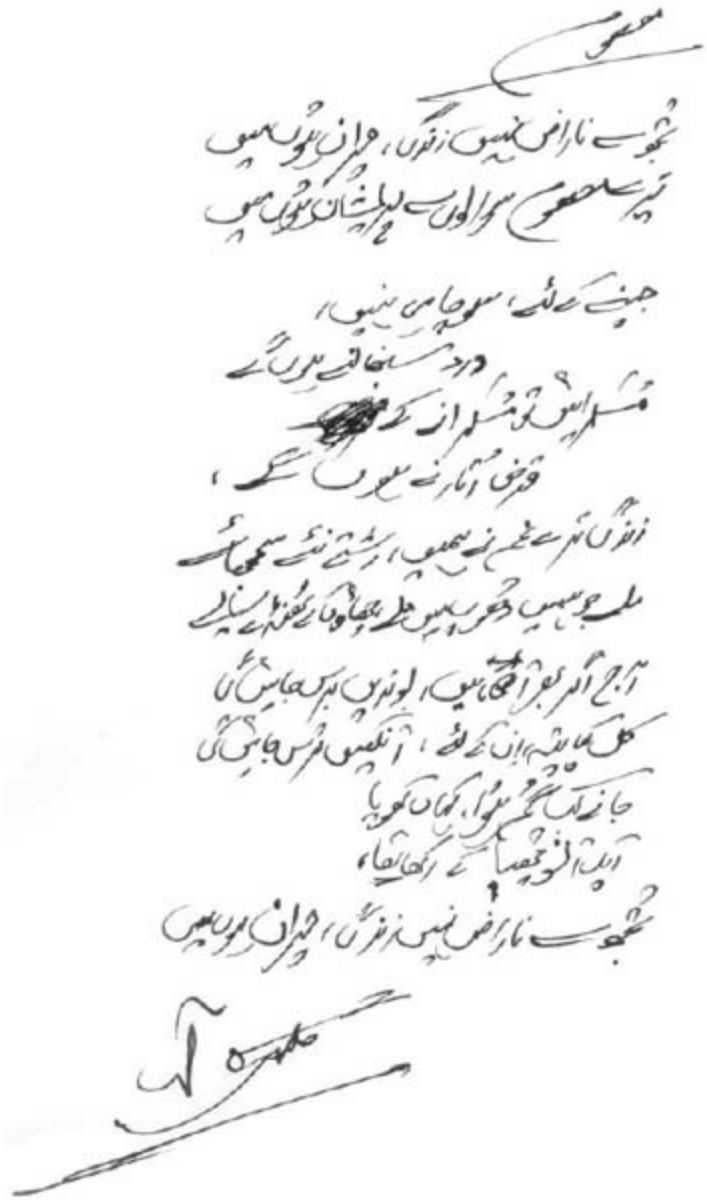
We met again and discussed my ideas on how I might adapt the story. The hero in Segal’s novel is a stunt man and the story is set in the world of films. But I changed the setting. Shekhar liked the treatment and so the producer of *Masoom*, guru Duttji’s brother, Devi Dutt, signed me on.

When I came to write the song, I was happy that the title *Masoom* could be worked into the lyrics.

> Tujhse naaraaz nahin zindagi hairaan hoon main
> Tere masoom sawaalon se pareshaan hoon main
>
> [I feel no anger at life, only bewilderment
> Your innocent questions leave me troubled]

Shekhar was fond of Anup Ghoshal’s voice and suggested that R. D. Burman use him. anup Ghoshal practised the song for many long hours with Pancham’s assistant Sapan Chakravorty and recorded it with much feeling.

NMK: Do you like writing songs that are used in the background? Rather than lip-sync songs.
G: I am reminded of an unusual situation. Anurag Kashyap sent me the script of his *No Smoking*. I read it but did not understand the story. So Anurag came to see me with Vishal Bhardwaj who was composing the music and producing the film. I told them I didn’t understand the script, but nevertheless wrote a couplet for a scene in which the hero of the film is hallucinating. I read the lines to anurag and he said it was just the kind of song that he wanted.



In Gulzar's hand, lyrics of the song 'Tujhse naaraaz nahin zindagi hairaan hoon main' from the film Masoom, *directed by Shekhar Kapur (1983).*

Anurag insisted I write at least one song for his film based on the couplet I had read to him. He told me that he intended to use all the songs in the background. So I agreed to write all the songs after seeing the final edit of the film.

NMK: That must have been a first—images inspiring the words. it's always the other way round.

G: Yes, it was a first for me. Poetically speaking, the *No Smoking* songs were

among my best. all the lyrics are connected to the world of smoking, no imagery falls outside of that world.

You know people do not always need to approach me to write songs for them. If a film idea excites my imagination, I approach the director. This has happened recently. The director Sujit Sarkar made a beautiful film called *Shoe Bite*, it is also known as *Johnny Mastana*, with amitabh Bachchan and Sarika. Shantanu composed the music and the songs were going to be used in the background. I asked Sujit Sarkar to let me write the lyrics. Unfortunately the film is stuck in some sort of legal tangle, but I hear amitabh Bachchan is helping them sort it out.

NMK: I loved your *Ishqiya* song 'Dil to bachcha hai' (The heart is so child-like), partly because it is unusual to have a song about mature love. Most love songs are written for the young, and love between older people seems an unworthy subject. It was heartening to see 'Dil to bachcha hai' become so popular.

G: That song came entirely out of the filmic situation. Khalujaan, the character Naseer plays, has passed his prime and yet falls in love again. When an old man falls in love, your first thought is: 'This fellow never learns'. *[we laugh]*

There are many situations for good songs about love between mature characters, but we aren't encouraged to write for those situations. Filmmakers want sentimental love songs for young couples or dance numbers.

'Raat Christmas ki thi, na tere bas ki thi, na mere bas ki thi' [it was a Christmas night, you could not hold back your feelings, nor could i] was written for the non-film album *Dil Padosi Hai*. The words tell the story of two married people who meet in a church. As the girl prays, she looks up and sees this man for the first time. She can never forget that Christmas night. The love they feel for one another is intense, even though they happen to be married.

NMK: It must have been liberating to work on non-film albums. Freeing the songs from a specific narrative.

G: Yes, it is liberating. I worked on a few non-film albums with R. D. Burman and Ashaji, Jagjit Singh, Bhupendra Singh and his wife Mitalee, and Vishal Bhardwaj.

The first non-film album I did was *Wo Jo Shayar Tha* with Bhupendra Singh whom I call ‘Bhupi’. That was in 1980. He was the first composer to write music for blank verse. He is an exceptional ghazal singer and a great connoisseur of poetry. He has a unique style of singing ghazals. Madan Mohanji was very fond of him.

Bhupi is also the best guitarist we have. He played the guitar for many songs by Pancham, including ‘Chura liya’ and ‘Dum maaro dum’.

Pancham had some unusual tunes that did not fit into any film because filmic situations are indeed limited. Either you need a wedding song or a love duet. So I suggested to Pancham that we make an album using these melodies. I thought it could be a great opportunity for us to do something different, to create songs that touched on subjects that the cinema usually shies away from. ashaji liked the idea very much.

Pancham was very busy then, but whenever he had any free time, he would say, ‘Let’s go to your house and do that “faltu” [pointless] work.’ That’s what he thought of it. It was ashaji who was responsible for us finally completing the album *Dil Padosi Hai*.

Salim Arif and I worked on an album, a tribute to the memory of my dear friend Jagjit Singh. The album was released on 8 February 2012, on Jagjit’s birthday. Jagjit and I had started working on it some months ago, but we didn’t get round to recording any tracks.

NMK: What happens to the lyrics that do not end up in a film?
G: Those songs stay with me. I wanted to remake *Devda* s at one stage, but it didn’t happen. R. D. Burman and I recorded some beautiful compositions for *Devdas*, but I can’t release the songs because the rights are with various people. There was also a lovely song composed by Jaidevji, which was never released because the film got shelved.

Vishal Bhardwaj has a number of unreleased songs for films that never took off like ‘Julia’, based on the life of Fearless Nadia. Vishal often tells me with a smile that some day we will release these songs.

NMK: Did you ever work again with S. D. Burman after ‘Mora ang lai le’?
G: No, but I frequently saw Dada at Bimalda’s office. When I used to visit Pancham at his home, ‘The Jet’, he would say, ‘go upstairs and see Baba.’

Dada was famous for having spats with people—it was a part of his

personality. He ate paan and always had a small paan-daan with him but never gave a paan to anyone. Majrooh Saaheb described him beautifully, ‘Vo bachhe ki tarah kameenay hain’ [he is as mean as a child can be].

S. D. Burman was indeed like a grown-up innocent child. I once heard about an incident involving Dada and the music director Kanu Roy. Kanu Roy was a great football fan and he asked Dada to take him to see a big match as Dada had an extra ticket. two famous teams, Mohan Bagan and East Bengal, were playing. They were rival teams like England and Australia. So Dada took Kanu Roy along with him.

When the match began, Dada, who was an East Bengal supporter, discovered that Kanu Roy was a Mohan Bagan fan. at half-time they went out of the stadium, but when half-time was up, Dada, who still had the tickets with him, left Kanu Roy outside and watched the rest of the match alone. *[we laugh]*

NMK: What do you think of S. D. Burman’s music?

G: Who am I to judge his music? he was an acknowledged master. Even though he was so gifted, it took a while for success to come to him. He had to struggle a great deal in Calcutta to find work in films.

S. D. Burman came from the royal family of Tripura. His personality was in his music—the personality of a man rooted in the soil of his land. You can hear the influence of Bengali folk music in his compositions.

We have great flautists like Hariprasad Chaurasia and Ronu Majumdar, but the way Dada blended the sound of the flute into his orchestral music was stunning. I have never heard anyone else use the flute as effectively.

Remember the song in *Kaala Bazaar*, ‘Apni to har aah ek toofaan hai, kya karein vo jaan kar anjaan hai, uparwaala jaan kar anjaan hai’ [There is a storm in every sigh of mine, but the one above knowingly pretends not to know]. The song was sung by Mohammed Rafi and filmed in a train compartment. I think the train was travelling through Darjeeling. In the instrumental portion of the song, you can hear the flute playing—Dada made it sound like a soft train whistle.

The hero, Dev Anand, is singing on the lower berth and his sweetheart played by Waheeda Rehman is lying on the upper berth. The use of the word ‘uparwaala’ [the one above] is a clever pun, as the parents of the girl are also in the train compartment and do not realize that the young man is in fact

referring to their daughter and not to god. Shailendra wrote this superb song.

NMK: Did S. D. Burman understand the intricacies of Hindi and Urdu?
G: He obviously knew Bengali better. He understood and spoke hindi, but in the manner of a Bengali. If you explained an Urdu verse to him, he could understand it.

NMK: I once interviewed Kaifi azmi who was talking about S. D. Burman's Urdu and he said how the composer would always say 'haalfil' instead of 'filhaal' (for the moment).
G: That was Sachinda. *[smiles]*

Hindi and Urdu weren't Salil Chowdhury's languages either. He moved to Bombay in 1953. But being a poet in his own right, he could easily grasp the spirit of a song in Urdu if the words were explained to him. I read Salilda's revolutionary songs in Bengali. He had lived through the freedom movement.

Salil Chowdhury was an exceptional composer in every sense. His tunes were never ordinary. If you listen to his songs carefully, you will hear a remarkable and skilful use of notes in the interlude music.

NMK: What was he like as a person?
G: The prerogative of all artists is to dodge the moment when you have to get down to work. We all do it. Unless you're up against a deadline, you keep avoiding that dreaded moment. Salilda was no different.

I remember a lovely incident. I had just seen Rajan Tarafdar's Bengali film *Ganga* and heard a song in it, 'Amaaye doobeylee re, amar bhashaylee re' [at times I drown, at times I float], which was composed by Salida. So I went over to his house and found him playing table tennis on the ground floor. He was deeply engrossed in the game. I told him how much I had liked the Bengali song in *Ganga* and suggested that he use the same tune for the bhajan that he was to write for Bimal Roy.

Distracted, Salilda said, 'good idea. go upstairs and work on the song with Kanu Ghosh. The piano is upstairs.' Kanu ghosh was his assistant. Salilda did not wish to stop his table tennis game, so he swiftly dispatched me upstairs. at that very moment, we heard Bimalda's car horn. He had a station wagon.

Hardly had I reached the upper floor when Salilda came bounding behind me, rushed to the piano, sat down and started playing the tune. When Bimal Roy made his way up to the first floor and entered the room, Salilda acted as though he was lost in the music. He looked up with a surprised expression on his face on seeing Bimalda there and innocently said, ‘Dada, why don’t we make our bhajan in the style of the *Ganga* song?’

The minute Bimalda had left and Salilda heard his car drive away, he flew down the staircase and returned to his game of table tennis. *[we laugh]*

NMK: That’s wonderful!

You talked so affectionately about Hemant Kumar with whom you worked on many songs, including the beautiful ‘hum ne dekhi hai’ from *Khamoshi*.

G: Yes, hemant Kumar composed ‘hum ne dekhi hai un aankhon ki mehekti khushboo’ [i have seen the fragrance of your eyes brimming over].

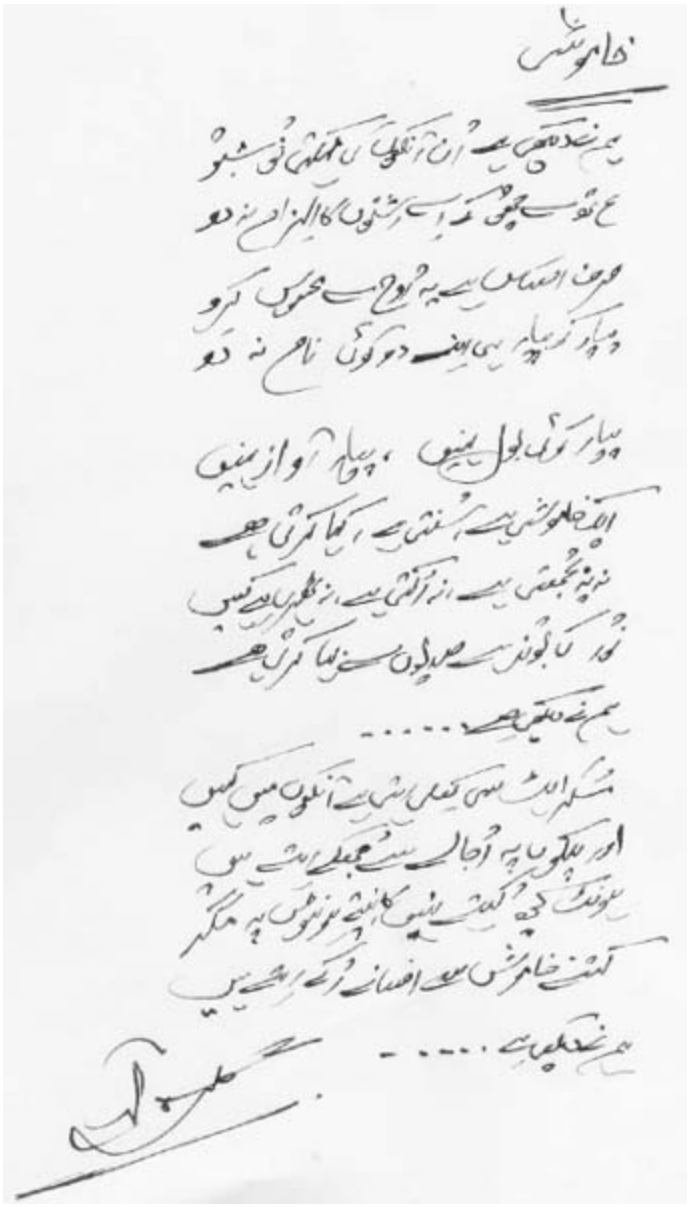
It is a beautiful song. But you know it attracted a lot of criticism. The song did not fit into the traditional idea of poetry because of its new imagery. The criticism leveled at me by poets and others was the very premise of the words. ‘a song talking about the fragrance of the eyes? how can eyes have fragrance? how can you call that poetry?’ That was essentially what I heard.

NMK: Did hemant Kumar comment on your unusual use of mixed metaphors?

G: He did not object because he knew poetry well and understood the nuances of language. He was a major exponent of Rabindra Sangeet. When Hemantda used to sing, his voice sounded very close to recitation. He always emphasized the words more than the tune. He was the only composer who did not ask a lyricist to change a single word in a song.

I wanted hemantda to record ‘hum ne dekhi hai’ in his voice, but he wanted Lataji to sing the song. I was a bit Khamoshi, *directed by Asit Sen (1969)*. reluctant. not about Lataji singing it, but because the lyrics were from the point of view of a man who is describing a woman’s eyes, so I felt a male singer should sing it. A girl does not typically talk of a man’s eyes. So how could Lataji sing it? I explained this to hemantda, but he insisted and said no one could sing it like her. The director of *Khamoshi*, Asit Sen, agreed with him and decided that one of the female characters in the film would stand at a

mike and mime to the words.



The Urdu lyrics of 'Hum ne dekhi hai', from the film Khamoshi, *directed by Asit Sen* (1969).

Lataji has such talent that she can change the gender of a song. till now no one has ever pointed out that something was amiss. *[smiles]*

NMK: Perhaps people were so intrigued by your imagery that they forgot to notice the words were from a man's perspective. It is such an atmospheric song.

G: It has a Sufiana mood and a timeless feel.

Life is full of ifs and buts, and I still believe hemant Kumar should have sung it in the style of the other *Khamoshi* song, 'tum pukaar lo tumhaara intezaar hai' [Call me to you. I wait for you]. His voice had a sleepy, nasal quality. It had such beauty.

NMK: Did Lataji ever say no to recording a song because she didn't like the lyrics?

G: 'Aap ki aankhon mein kuchh mehke hue se raaz hain' [in your eyes hide fragrant secrets], from the film *Ghar* had a line—'Aap ki badmaashiyon ke ye naye andaaz hain' [This is another of your wicked ways].

Pancham was composing the tune and was quite taken aback by the words and asked, 'What's this? Lataji will not like it.'

'Let's see,' was my reply.

When Lataji heard the lyrics, she laughed and said she thought this line was the most interesting. If you listen to the song, you will hear Lataji laugh while singing it.

NMK: You have worked with so many composers—who have you collaborated with the most often?

G: R. D. Burman. Pancham was composing music for films before I became a director. Working with him was such a pleasure—whether it was for a film that I was directing or just writing the lyrics for. We understood each other's expressions and taste. The objective for us was never the popularity of the song. We were concerned about the impact it would ultimately have in the film. Pancham understood the medium of cinema very well.

Before I had begun work on *Mere Apne*, n. C. Sippy had already signed Salil Chowdhury and who would say no to Salilda? it was such a privilege working with him. I was a new director and could not at first impose the choice of composer, but when I made my second film, *Parichay*, I immediately chose Pancham.

Pancham once told me, 'When I compose a song, in my mind's eye, I see the face of the singer who should sing it. If Lataji sings the song, this is how she will sound. Asha must sing this one. This is Kishore's song. But there are some songs that I compose, I see only one face—yours. So I put it aside for you.' I took it as a big compliment.

NMK: R. D. Burman was a great singer too.
G: He once gave me a tune, telling me it was a most ordinary tune. I wrote these words on it: ‘Dhanno ki aankhon mein raat ka surma’ [Dhanno’s eyes are lined with the kohl of the night]. Ram Mohan plays a train driver who sings this song in the film *Kitaab*.

Pancham understood screen characterization perfectly and knew that the train driver, a mature man, could not sing like a boy, so he recorded the song himself. The tune was indeed ordinary, but the way his voice became the character made it special.

When Shammi Kapoor heard it, he said, ‘Why didn’t you ask me to perform the song?’ I explained, ‘how could I ask you to appear in just one scene?’

‘I would have come for this song,’ was his reply. Shammiji had an amazing sense of music and knew just how unusual the song was.

NMK: I can see why Shammiji liked it so much—it has an air of abandon, which was very much Shammiji’s style. There is a short audio clip on Youtube with a fascinating discussion between R. D. Burman and you about the song.
G: Really? I must find it. It surprises me to know that so many of our songs are still played. They have endured time.

NMK: The other composer you have worked with a great deal is Vishal Bhardwaj. What stands out in the way he works?
G: He thinks like a film director. He understands the subtext of scenes; the underlying emotions and the impact the song will have in the film.

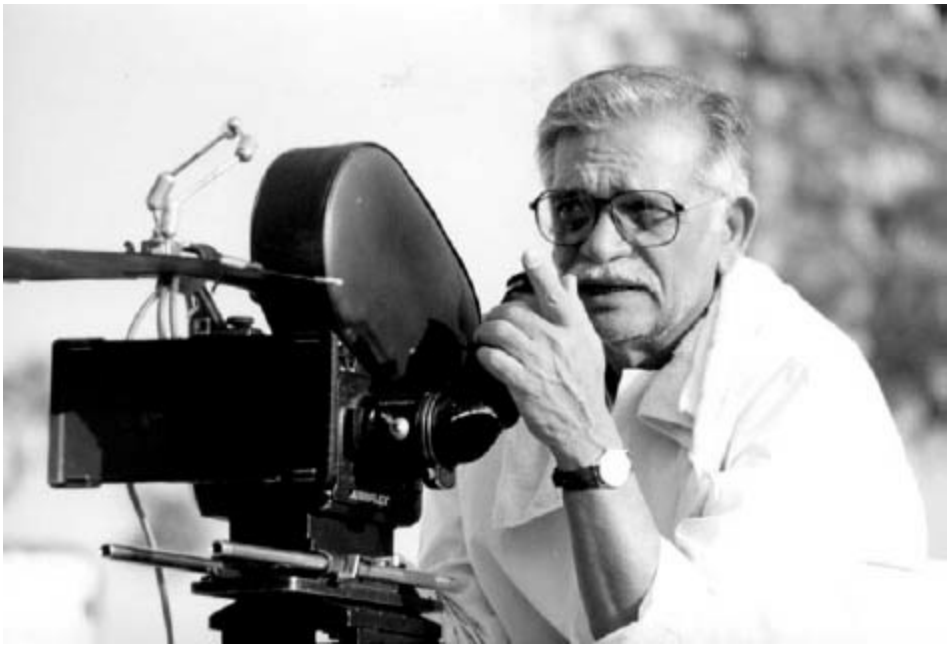
Take ‘Pehli baar mohabbat ki hai, aakhri baar mohabbat ki hai’ [The first time I have loved, the last time I have loved] from *Kaminey* or *Ishqiya*’s ‘Dil to bachcha hai’ [The heart is childlike], they match the scene and characters perfectly.

Vishal’s compositions are often based on semi-classical traditions and folk music. He knows a lot about music. For *Hu Tu Tu*, he heard many Marathi theatre songs before composing ‘Nikla neem taley se nikla’ [From under the neem tree appeared the moon]. He researches his music thoroughly.

Sanchaari is a Bengali form of music that he and I have discussed many times. He used it in the *Omkara* song, ‘O saathi re, din doobey na, aa chal din

ko rokein' [Beloved, let us stop the sun from setting so that the day never ends]. The Sanchaari allows you to go away from the antara [the second stage of a musical composition] and later return to it.

I don't know how this musical form came into Bengali music, but the tradition can be traced back to the qawwali. In Sanchaari, you sing, stop, go on a diversion and then come back to the main road. A good example of Salil Chowdhury's use of the form is in the song 'O sajna, barkha bahaar aayi' [O beloved, the rainy season is here] from *Parakh*. Salilda goes away from the antara, introduces a new tune and then returns to it again.



Released in 1999, Hu tu tu *was the last film that Gulzar directed.*

Shankar Mahadevan of Shankar-Ehsaan-Loy also uses the Sanchaari in his compositions. He is a spontaneous composer and has the gift of 'nourishing songs', as Pancham would say.

NMK: What do you think a. R. Rahman has given to Indian film music?
G: He has broken away from the shackles of the traditional film song and freed it. His compositions are like blank verse.

He develops a tune in the style of a vistaar [elaboration of notes in a particular raag]. This form does not have a bandish, or cross line, but is a

continuous melodic improvization. In vistaar, you do not need to come back to the asthayi [the first and the fundamental part of a composition]. Once he establishes the main composition, we do not know when, and if, he will choose to return to it.

A. R. Rahman's compositions are often based on classical music. He uses a wide range of folk sounds in his instrumentation. If he decides to use the sarangi or tabla, it is played in a folk style. a. R. knows a lot about world music and Western classical, which gives his work an added dimension and texture.

I am not a musicologist and those who know music well may think I do not know what I'm talking about, but I am sharing my thoughts with you.

NMK: What kind of film song moves you?
G: Lataji's 'Rasik balma' [Enchanting beloved]. it's so haunting. Shankar–Jaikishan composed it and hasrat Jaipuri wrote the lyrics. I also love listening to the great Urdu poet Sahir's hindi song, 'Mann re tu kaahe na dheer dhare?' [O heart, why can you not learn the art of patience?]

NMK: That's a beautiful choice. One is so romantic and the other so thoughtful.
G: The other song I really like is Rajkumari's 'ghabra ke jo hum sar ko takraayein to accha ho' [Ending life is better than living it in misery] from *Mahal*. it's beautiful. I wasn't very smart when I first heard it, i'm a bit smarter now, but I still think the song has a great metre and moving words. It is so simply said.

NMK: Have you ever felt the choice of singer was not the right one for a song?
G: Now and again a song needs a particular atmosphere. I am thinking of Bhupen hazarika's 'Dil hoom hoom kare' [The heart's agitations] from Kalpana Lajmi's film *Rudaali*.

If you listen to Bhupenda's rendition, in terms of technique and tune, it is less perfect than Lataji's version— but he has created a special mood through his voice because he was a great folk singer.

Lata Mangeshkar recorded the song 'Bas ek chup si lagi hai, nahin udaas nahin' [i am silent, no, I am not sad] for the film *Sannata*. hemant Kumar

composed it and when he sang it for us, we could sense he was utterly absorbed in the song. His voice sounded so extraordinary that the director decided to include it in the film together with Lataji's version.

NMK: Did you work with Mohammed Rafi?
G: Unfortunately, I didn't write many songs for Rafi Saaheb. Peer aadmi they [he was a saintly man]. The entire film industry adored him and regarded him with great respect. If you wanted an example of a truly decent man, Mohammed Rafi was the person who came to mind.

NMK: I hear Kishore Kumar's recording sessions were full of fun.
G: Ashaji always said it was difficult singing a duet with him because he would make her laugh in the middle of the recording. at that time songs were recorded with a full orchestra and as soon as the interlude music would start, Kishoreda would walk over to the musicians and tease the violinist or drummer while they were trying to play. But he would come back to the mike precisely when he knew he had to catch the beat. He was fantastic.

Kishoreda and I became friends during the making of *Do Dooni Chaar* [1968]. He was a star, so he came to the set when he felt like, but at exactly 5.45 p.m., he would get fidgety and tell me, 'it's getting late. is this shot never going to end?'

Kishore Kumar was famous for his eccentricities. But the reason why he insisted on leaving on time was his wife, Madhubala, who was very unwell. He would tell us, 'no matter what happens I must leave at six. This is the time I have promised to be with her.' That was another side of the wonderful Kishoreda.

We have had some extraordinary singers—Lataji, ashaji and Rafi Saaheb. I call ashaji 'Boudi', which means sister-in-law in Bengali.

Today's singers are also very talented. Their voices have a different kind of energy. The way Sukhwinder Singh sang 'Jai ho' was tremendous. He made the song come alive. He is among our finest singers today.

Sunidhi Chauhan has great range and can sing all kinds of songs. She brought a fabulous energy to the way she sang 'Beedi jalai le'. hindi cinema has luckily had good singers in every decade.

NMK: Besides writing songs, poetry, screenplays and short stories, you have

also written biographical stories, including ‘Sahir and Jadu’. It movingly describes the relationship between Sahir Ludhianvi and Javed akhtar.

G: There was no fiction in it. I sent the story to Javed Saaheb and was very happy when he told me that he had liked it. He does not have an overly sentimental nature and takes everything in his stride. He is a man with a great sense of humour and wit, but is basically an emotional person. I have spent many evenings with him and Salim Khan during the time we were working on Ramesh Sippy’s *Andaaz* [1971].

Bimal Roy is the subject of another of my biographical stories. They were published as a series in the Jnanpith monthly magazine and now the writer Sanjoy Shekhar, who lives in Jakarta, has translated them into English. His book will be published sometime in 2012. I found his translations close to the original. He has done a fine job. Sanjoy has also translated a hundred songs of mine.

NMK: When writing biographical stories, how close to the truth can you be?

G: There are many aspects of truth and many layers to a person. My point of view is just an interpretation of personalities and incidents.

There is no absolute truth because we experience life and events through subjective eyes. Roshanara Bagh, for instance, was a place for me where I would play cricket in my childhood. I later discovered Roshanara’s tomb, which was located in the gardens, was built by Emperor aurangzeb, as a symbol of affection for his sister. And during the 1947 riots, ammunition was found hidden in that beautiful monument.

So even places can mean different things to different people. Perspectives are forever changing.

NMK: The way history is recorded must also depend on the version you read.

G: History is very subjective. But records can be close to the truth. I must have read about a hundred books on the Partition, each providing a different historical analysis. I found the book *Mission with Mountbatten* most interesting. It gave me yet another view of the reasons that led to the Partition.

I discovered something I had not come across in any book. I once visited the Viceregal Lodge in Shimla. It used to be the former residence of British

viceroys and governor generals. after independence, it was suggested that the Lodge be converted into a state residence. But the then President, Dr S. Radhakrishnan, thought it should be used as a place of learning. So it now houses the Indian institute of advanced Study, and was formally inaugurated in 1965 by Dr Radhakrishnan.

My hosts at the institute showed me the room where the decision to divide India took place. They pointed two doors out to me and told me something I found fascinating. Because of the tension surrounding the Partition, which obviously affected the relations between Pandit nehru and Muhammad ali Jinnah—Jinnah Saaheb refused to use the same door as Panditji. But the room only had one door, so a second door was made overnight so they could enter through different doors to attend that historic meeting.

The incident may not have been significant enough to be recorded in the history of the Partition, but it is a revealing human detail. It tells me how great statesmen behave at certain moments.

I suppose when people can no longer communicate with one another, they part. Be it nehru and Jinnah, or Salim and Javed. *[we laugh]*

NMK: You would have been very young, but did you ever see Mahatma gandhiji?
G: Yes, when I was a young boy. He undertook a fast unto death to diffuse the tension in Delhi between Sikhs and Muslims. It was during the celebration at the Sisganj gurdwara in Chandni Chowk on gurpurab day [guru's rememberance day]. The procession had to pass in front of the Jama Masjid and an objection was raised concerning the procession music that might disturb the prayers. Whatever the real situation was, I believe we were victims of political manoeuvring and not smart enough to realize it. We played into the hands of the British and they knew how to keep tensions alive and encourage the different communities to fight with one another.

So tension grew and when finally a solution was reached, gandhiji came to the gurdwara to break his fast and give a speech. That was when I saw him from very near. I was very young, but the scene is still vivid in my mind.

NMK: Do you recall the days leading up to independence?
G: I remember the 1942 Quit India movement. My father joined the anti-

British demonstrations, and Jasmer participated in the student protests. He was studying at the hindu College in those days.

When independence finally came, of course people celebrated. But it was not an entirely happy time in Delhi. The riots and killings during the Partition had left deep scars. It was a terrible time—so much blood had been shed. It cast a long and dark shadow.

Faiz voiced the feelings of many when he wrote:

Ye daagh daagh ujaala
Ye shab-gazeeda saher
Vo intezaar tha jiska
Ye vo saher to nahin

[This leprous daybreak
Dawn night's fangs have mangled
This is not that long-looked-for break of day]

Translated by V. G. Kiernan

NMK: Did you witness the violence during the Partition?
G: I was in Delhi at the time and saw a lot of bloodshed. With due respect to Bapu, the father of our nation, I cannot say independence was non-violent. Millions of people were butchered in the riots and millions lost their homes. Things might have been different if people did not have to move from one place to another.

There was another thing that was crucial and not obvious to anyone at the time. You see, hundreds of thousands of families on both sides of the border had to abandon their homes in those alarming days, but no one had imagined they were leaving their homes forever. We all believed that once the British had left, and things had settled down, some sort of compromise would be reached and we could return home. Pakistan was a reality but we never thought we would be parted from the land of our birth and could never go back.

NMK: What prompted such violence at the Partition?
G: I don't believe even Mr Jinnah was happy to see such violence. He asked

for a Muslim state but did not expect the carnage. The reasons for it were not economic or social. It was the folly of religion. A fanatical state of mind came to rule. Religion can cause trouble.

NMK: Do you think the two communities have forgiven each other now?
G: Political manoeuvring was at work then and still is. It has a powerful impact. People are dragged into conflict for political reasons, and for gain. It was also true that many Hindus and Muslims protected one another during the riots. Many Hindus sheltered their Muslim friends and neighbours, and many Muslims did the same. If there is trouble, people protect each other even now. But fundamentalists existed then and still do.

My father taught us to believe religion was a personal matter. Harbouring prejudices of any kind was alien to him. He had Muslim friends and so do i. My Muslim friends celebrate Diwali and we celebrate Eid.I have a friend called Rafique Merchant—we play tennis together and when we meet every day, we hug each other three times and wish each other ‘Eid Mubarak’ as they do on Eid.

I have always had friends who are Sikhs, Hindus and Christians. I play tennis every morning with Leyland and George. They are among my closest friends. Umesh Pachigar became my regular tennis partner when I lost my friend Hussain Taylor.

Umesh and I are the Leander Paes and Mahesh Bhupathi of Pali hill. *[laughs]*

NMK: You told me that you fast during Ramzan. how did that start?
G: In fact I used to fast for the full thirty days. It wasn’t for religious reasons. It began because Meenaji was very unwell and had to have her medicine, so she was unable to fast. I told her, ‘You must have your medicine and I will fast in your place. We will share the “sawaab” [blessings].’ That is how I began fasting during Ramzan.

I have less stamina now, but still manage to fast for ten or fifteen days. I enjoy it. It’s a way of life for me. We live amidst so many religions in India and partake in a diversity of cultures. Which other country can offer you this? Only in India can you celebrate the Parsi new Year with your Parsi friends and when you say goodbye to them, you could bump into a Panditji who gives you Sai Baba’s prasad—all in the same hour.

NMK: Yet the same mix of people can become intolerant and violent. You lived through the riots during the Partition, how did they affect you?
G: I used to have nightmares for almost twenty-five years. I would get into a terrible state and wake up in the middle of the night, trembling with fear. I tried not to go back to sleep in case the bad dream would return.

In those nightmares, I found myself running, escaping. Something scary looms in front of me and I run. You know it's very difficult to run in a dream. The road is never ending. I run over houses, terraces and cliff tops. A fire rages all around me. My sleeve gets caught on a nail and I can't free it. Images are distorted. Terrifying nightmares.

NMK: You were about thirteen in 1947 and as you say the nightmares only stopped some twenty-five years later. That is a long time.
G: Yes, it is.

All through Indian history there have been conflicts. There were riots before 1947 because India is a place of many religions, and at times friction has flared up even within the same community—Muslims have fought Muslims, Hindus have fought Hindus. There has also been growing tension between different castes. But the conflict between hindus and Muslims is deep-rooted and resulted in the 1947 riots. The Gujarat riots can also be traced back to 1947.

All I can hope for now is that the world becomes a better place for my grandson. Peace is what we all want.

NMK: You spoke of your nightmares, but what about more pleasant dreams?
G: In my happier dreams I am playing cricket! But you don't always remember your dreams, only impressions of them. I still dream but while I am wide awake. *[smiles]*

NMK: I was wondering whether the Partition and your own family's division might have got mixed up in your mind, resulting in those nightmares. They say dreams are a way of us working things out, and it is well known that people who are uprooted from their homes suffer trauma. You had a double uprooting. Your family had to leave Dina and you had to leave the family.
G: In addition to that, I was not rebellious or courageous. *[very thoughtful]* But I know I had some inner strength and held onto it. On the outside, I

wasn’t brave and had no illusions about that.

The only thing you can do is to hold onto a sense of self. Ultimately you can only take responsibility for yourself. But if I had not turned to writing, I might have perished.

NMK: How did you get over your fears?
G: It took me a long time. I still react emotionally when I hear about a riot no matter where it erupts. It was through writing that I finally managed to purge my fears.

I have talked about Salim Arif. He was my associate director and part of my film unit. Salim has assisted me in many films, including *Ijaazat* and *Maachis* and also worked on my television serial *Mirza Ghalib*. Salim Arif is a dear friend. One day he decided to create a play out of four of my short stories and some poems. The play was titled *Kharaashein*. It deals with communal violence in the Punjab, Bengal and Gujarat. I was not convinced that the play would work, but it did, thanks to Salim.

Salim also produced another play written by me called *Lakeerein*. It is set on the India-Pakistan border, sixty years after the Partition. People live there like friendly neighbours, but if you read the newspapers or hear some politicians talk, you would think blood was being shed at these borders at every instant. I think people just get on with their lives.

NMK: Do you have many Pakistani friends?
G: Yes, of course. Yesterday the Urdu poet Hassan Abbas Raza called me from Karachi. He wanted me to write a blurb for his next collection of poems.

A Pakistani poet of distinction, Ayub Khawar is another dear friend. He is a filmmaker and has directed the TV serial ‘gulzar Classics’, based on my short stories. It was shown on geo TV in Pakistan. The producer of the series, Hassan Zia, visits India often and whenever he comes here, he brings spicy food for me from Karachi and khadi for my kurtas.

Zafar Hassan has written my biography, published in Lahore. He talked to some people who knew my father, and in his book has pictures of the old family house in Dina and even the street where we lived. The front door to our house is just the same.

Hardly a day passes without some friend calling me from across the

border. I cherish all my Pakistani friends, including Abida Parveen, and the celebrated Urdu writer Intizar Hussain.

I was very sad when I heard that Mehdi Hassan passed away recently. We were friends from the time he first visited India. We shared many lovely evenings at my home when he would come over with our common friend Rahi Sabarwal.

I wrote a poem for Mehdi Saaheb and paid tribute to him at the launch of 'Aman ki Asha' [hope for Peace], a peace movement initiated by *The Times of India* and the *Daily Jung* in Pakistan. When Mehdi Saaheb passed away, many Pakistani television channels asked me to recite the poem on camera so they could it air it 'live'. These were the first few lines:

> Aankhon ko visa nahin lagta
> Sapnon ki sarhad hoti nahin
> Bandh aankhon se roz chala jaata hoon
> Sarhad paar main milne Mehdi hassan se
>
> [The eyes do not need a visa
> Dreams know no borders
> With closed eyes every day I go
> Across the border to meet Mehdi Hassan]

'Aman ki asha' is an important initiative of peace and helps to encourage contact with each other because I believe there is no real animosity between the peoples of India and Pakistan.

NMK: You mentioned you occasionally get white khadi from Karachi. Many have remarked that you always wear white kurtas. Why did you decide to only wear white?
G: Decide is not the right word. I like white, so I wear white.

NMK: For how many years have you worn white?
G: Umpteen, as they say in English. *[laughs]*

I have worn white for so many years that if I decided to wear a colourful shirt, it would feel like a stranger sitting on my shoulders.

NMK: You have been writing a lot for the theatre recently. Do you find writing for the stage a challenge?
G: It helped enormously that I had some experience in stage production. The basic difference is in understanding the physical limitation of the stage. In a play, you need to develop action and character as you do in the cinema, but the stage itself limits you. Say a man enters a room and looks down from the window at the street below. You can show the man entering, but obviously you cannot show the street from his point of view. You have to consider the unity of the set, time and place of your story.

What is exciting about the theatre is getting an immediate reaction to your work. You know at once whether you have communicated an idea or a feeling. On top of that, watching a play is an experience that changes with every performance unlike watching a film.

NMK: Have you tried introducing new elements in your plays?
G: Yes, and I hope they will succeed. The play i'm writing now is based on Tagore's *Streer Patra*. I am using a small screen on the stage on which some scenes will be projected and so the action will alternate between stage and screen.

Lubna Salim, Salim Arif's wife, will play the lead character. She is the writer Javed Siddiqui's daughter and a very good actress. If she had decided to work in films, I think she would have earned a great deal, but it might have limited her acting range. But earning tons of money does not interest her. If it had, I could have borrowed some from her. *[laughs]*

NMK: Musical theatre is very popular in the West whereas the love of the musical as such seems to have faded in India. Why do you think that happened, given the importance of the Urdu Parsee Theatre, which depended on music?
G: Plays with music are still performed, but the musical per say is less popular here than in the West. A musical version of Gogol's *The Government Inspector* was staged in India with the title *Ala Afsa*. It was produced and directed by Mudra Rakshas. Marathi theatre has a great tradition of plays with classical music. Jabbar Patel's excellent production of Vijay Tendulkar's *Ghashiram Kotwal* is a fine example of the Marathi theatre.

I wrote a musical play for children called *Agar aur Magar*, which was

inspired by Brecht's *He said yes. He said no*. The original play is not a musical, but Brecht has used verse beautifully in it. IPTA produced *Agar aur Magar*. It had music by Kuldip Singh.

NMK: Have you read many Urdu Parsee plays?
G: I read a few plays by Agha Hashar Kashmiri. He was an important Urdu poet, playwright and dramatist. Besides writing very stylized stage dramas, he has also translated the plays of Shakespeare into Urdu. He is remembered for his *Yahudi Ki Ladki* and *Shirin Farhad*, which were made into films. There is a lot written on how Agha Hashar kept the theatre alive, but I haven't read much analysis of his work.

The stories from the Ramayana are another significant influence on Indian cinema. The template for early screen characters, good and evil, Ram and Raavan came from the Ramayana. On the surface, these characters may seem simple, but when you discover what they represent, you find they are full of layers and complexities. It has taken centuries for scholars to interpret the Ramayana.

NMK: Is Indian theatre vibrant today?
G: The growth of the NCPA [National Centre for the Performing Arts] itself is proof of how much the people of Bombay love the theatre and always have. Vijaya Mehta was once the director of the NCPA. She is an amazing actress and has directed a few films too. We call her Baiji. She's an adorable lady.

Shivaji Mandir has had a long and well-established tradition of staging charming Marathi plays with classical music. The middle classes in Maharashtra are very fond of the theatre and the same is true of the Bengali middle class. In Bengal, the theatre is vibrant and many Bengali film actors perform on the stage. gujarati plays are usually very commercial—slapstick comedies and family dramas that attract big crowds.

Shashi Kapoor did a marvellous thing by reopening Prithvi Theatre in Juhu after their theatre at Opera house closed down. He has given this city a great gift. His daughter Sanjana used to look after the place so well, and now his son Kunal is in charge. They don't have an eye on profit and run the place for the love of the stage.

NMK: Which stage productions have you enjoyed?
G: Naseeruddin Shah's plays based on the works of Ismat Chughtai and Saadaat hasan Manto are superb. Naseer's performance and direction is excellent and the fact that these plays are based on Urdu literature makes them doubly appealing to me. Naseer's wife Ratna and his daughter are fine actors too.

I remember once seeing Dr Shreeram Lagoo play Socrates on stage, and at one point, he delivered a twenty-minute soliloquy. I can never forget how gripped the audience was, and watching their faces was an experience in itself.

NMK: You have great experience working with film actors and now have observed the way stage actors work—how would you define the different skills?
G: A film actor can ask the director for a retake or request him to delete a shot. A stage actor does not have the luxury of a retake. He must remain in character for the duration of the play, while the film actor is constantly going in and out of character. He will give a shot and sit down, make ten calls from his mobile or a send a dozen text messages and nowadays he may even tweet from the set. When the next shot is ready, the actor will re-enter the character. So the real difficulty in film acting is creating a character in fragmented time.

Naseeruddin Shah often tells me how fed up he is of waiting around between shots because he feels it breaks the rhythm of a good performance. When Naseer was filming a key scene in *Libaas*, he asked me not to divide the scene into shots so he could perform the whole scene in one extended take. I planned the camera movements accordingly and he gave a stunning performance.

Even a ham actor can get by in films. *[we laugh]* This is because, as I said, the director needs to extract fragments of performance. And the performance can be repeated again and again till it works. A theatre actor has to be an actor in the real sense of the word.

NMK: A well known British theatre director, Matthew Warchus, told me there is no place on the stage for an actor to hide.
G: Nicely said and it's so true. Take the language problem. When Sridevi began working in hindi films she couldn't speak hindi well, so Rekha used to

dub for her. No one can help the stage actor.

NMK: We have talked about the biographical stories you have written. I wonder if you were ever tempted to write your memoirs?
G: There is no point. So many people have written about me. My life history cannot change for the sake of an autobiography. Finally it's the same story.

I think the novelty of this book will come from your questions. And the amusing thing about talking to you is that when we start talking no one could guess where our conversation ends up.

I have not experienced this kind of an interview. I often hear a tone of aggression in the line of questioning when I am interviewed—it is not a sharing of ideas. I see the faces of some journalists and a frown seems pasted on their brows, which suggests—'am I managing to trap you into saying something indiscreet?' They don't smile much.

NMK: Journalists work under so much pressure these days. Everything is for yesterday. I am sure you will agree that India has seen incredible changes in the last twenty years. Life is lived in top gear here.
G: Technology has entered our lives in such a big way. I am not saying it is a bad thing. But many of these changes have not emerged from our culture. In the West, these changes have roots in their cultural context. They have been imported here. So we're essentially aping a lifestyle that belongs to another social and cultural reality. That said, I believe the enormous changes we are experiencing will ultimately get absorbed into our culture. The artificial will be discarded.

Indian culture is so deep-rooted and a five thousand-year-old culture cannot change fundamentally, and as it evolves it will continue to assimilate new influences. We have changed so much from the time of the Aryans yet we still have snake charmers. We still celebrate nag Panchami and feed milk to snakes. Our tribal faiths and ceremonies have survived and are still practised.

NMK: Indian cinema is also going through great change. Do you think some of filmmakers manage to marry the traditional and the modern in an effective way?
G: Directors like Kumar Shahani and Mani Kaul come to mind. In the 1970s,

they adapted the idiom of European cinema to the Indian context. Mani Kaul made a film on a Mohan Rakesh play *Aashadh Ka Ek Din* [1971]. It is deeply embedded in Indian roots. He did not make a high-voltage Hollywood action thriller. In my view, his films have blended the traditional with the modern beautifully. He is an important figure for anyone who does serious work on Indian cinema. He had great vision.

Mani Kaul and I met some time ago in Pune and we were discussing the non-linear structure of dreams and their strange mix of distorted images. Some images appear in abstract forms. Shapeless. At times there are no images at all, only sounds are heard. But dreams come from the subconscious. They are born from what and who we are. I told Mani Kaul his films were a bit like abstract dreams. He laughed and said, 'if only we had met sooner. I would have heard an explanation of my cinema at least from one person.' *[laughs]*

NMK: I feel many film stories these days lack depth. Unlike the 1950s when Marxist film writers and lyricists, even more so than the directors themselves, infused Indian cinema with a genuine concern for the poor and the need for society at large to change. They expressed this in their dialogue and songs.

Box-office success, the fuelling of the celebrity machinery and building up the stars as brands seems the ambition of many Hindi films today. Am I being very harsh?

G: No, you're not. Society has come to measure the worth of individuals by their financial success, and not because of their values. This is the crucial shift in focus today and it is bound to reflect in the cinema.

NMK: How can one find a balance between old and new values? Considering, as you often say, everything has to change.

G: I don't think an individual can answer this question. Society has to find a balance. There is no formula to bringing about social change because society is constantly evolving.

Today we live in a world where everything is connected. Physical and cultural borders matter less and every country is affected to some degree by what is happening in another corner of the world.

NMK: Life has changed so much for you too—from the days when you were

a young boy living in Delhi. What is a typical day for you now?
G: I wake up at five when it is still dark. I want the sun to look for me instead of my looking for the sun. Just as the first serve in tennis can be advantageous, so the first serve must be mine. The second goes to the sun.

I have always been involved with sports and this means that I need to sleep early because I don't want to feel tired the next day. I once used to play badminton, and for the last twenty-five years I've played tennis every morning at the Bandra Gymkhana.

I find the early mornings so interesting. It is a time when I think of nothing—no deadlines, no politics nor what I must do later in the day—even doctors' appointments are forgotten. I'm seventy-seven, yet manage to follow this routine, more or less.

NMK: What happens when you get home after tennis?
G: I spend an hour reading the morning papers. The phone starts ringing and text messages beep their way into my day. Around 10.15 a.m., I go down to the office on the ground floor of my house. Then my workday begins. From time to time a director may drop in to discuss the songs I am writing for his film. I try to stop by 5 o'clock and go back upstairs. I may spend the evening watching cricket or tennis on television. Watching tennis is a must.

I enjoy the way Federer plays. He is cool and has a gentle smile. The only thing I have against Nadal is the villainous grimaces he makes. André Agassi was a thorough gentleman on court. I recently read his excellent autobiography, *Open*, and have become an even bigger fan. McEnroe was also a favourite of mine.

I admire Sachin tendulkar's achievements but am a greater fan of Sunil gavaskar. When he used to score a century, I celebrated by throwing a party at home. So all my friends knew if I was hosting a party, it was thanks to Gavaskar.

I am also a fan of Wasim Akram. Dhoni's achievements are impressive but his temperament is even more so. He carries himself like a true sportsman. He has a thinking smile and it makes me believe that he must be an interesting person. He is humble and unpretentious.

NMK: But humility is not a great virtue today.
G: *[laughs]* That's true. humility in competitive times is not the sign of an

achiever. A go-getter is admired far more than a humble person.

This is an age where people live for the moment. That's all very well, but believing in the moment at any cost or at the detriment of others is not right.

Everything that goes up must come down. The longer it takes you to get to the top, the longer you might stay at the top. If you get there too quickly, you may slide down in no time at all.

NMK: You choose to live away from the glitz and glamour of the film world. And as a writer you probably spend hours working alone. are you becoming somewhat of a recluse?

G: I am not a recluse. I live alone but don't live a lonely life. I see people, but don't attend all the parties and events that I am invited to. Many friends think I am a deserter and have stopped inviting me for dinner because they think: 'he is not going to turn up anyway.'

Nothing is absolutely fixed. Yesterday Raakheeji cooked here. When Raakheeji cooks at her place, I go there. Things have changed since my grandson was born. Every evening I take him to Joggers' Park for a walk, or should I say he takes me? today Raakheeji will join us.

NMK: Your daughter Meghna has also directed films. Did you encourage her to do so?

G: I have never stopped Bosky from doing what she wanted. Raakheeji too let her do what she felt was right for her. My daughter is a very private person by nature. She was interested in writing and used to write articles in *The Times of India* at college. As a sociology student, she was very aware of the world around her.

One day Boksy announced to me that she was joining director Saeed Mirza as an assistant. Saeed's son used to study with her at St. Xavier's. I was pleased with her decision and told her, 'You have chosen the right people to work with.'

She was the chief assistant on *Naseem*. Saeed Saaheb encouraged her a great deal. When she finished *Naseem*, she worked with me on the post-production of *Maachis*. She has also made two documentaries, one was on the growing number of private security agencies in the city, and the other on women domestic servants. When I was making *Hu Tu Tu*, she worked with me from the scripting stage. It is very moving for me to see Bosky so

involved with her work.

NMK: How did she get her first break as a director?
G: She wrote a script about a surrogate mother and needed a producer, so she went to see Jhamu Sughand. I knew him very well too. He liked her idea and produced her first film *Filhaal*. I was very happy that Bosky had met the right kind of producer. He gave her complete freedom and allowed her to make the film in the way she wanted. Sadly, Jhamu Sughand has also passed away.

Bosky was very particular about the casting of *Filhaal*. She wanted Sushmita Sen and tabu. She got to know tabu when they were working on *Hu Tu Tu*, and Sushmita Sen and Bosky became friends during the making of *Filhaal*. She wrote the script and dialogue, but turned to me for the songs. She did not approve of some of the lyrics and I had to rewrite some lines. *[laughs]* I admired the fact that Bosky knew what she wanted. She has a clear mind.

Filhaal was received very well. But she was labelled an intellectual kind of director. It took her a long time before she could make another film. Pritish nandy gave her a second chance and produced *Just Married*, which was released in 2007. During the making of the film, she became close friends with his daughter Rongita. They are still close friends.

NMK: The film world has become so competitive. how does she cope with it all?
G: When it's your own daughter, you feel so concerned. It pains me at times. I know a star once made her wait eleven hours at Mehboob Studios before showing up. I almost cried when I heard about it. I will never stop being concerned about her. She will always be the centre of my life.

Like most fathers, I found it difficult to accept the idea of losing a daughter when she decided to marry. But when she married govind, I knew I had found a son. They met at college and I am so happy that he chose her. It has lightened my heart.

NMK: Whose personality do you see in her? Yours? Or Raakheeji's?
G: I think all children are rascals. They look like one parent and have the mannerisms of the other. That way they please both mother and father. *[we laugh]*

NMK: You once described your relationship with your wife as living together, separately. What did you mean?

G: While I was talking to you, Raakheeji called and wanted to know where the driver was and whether I had time to see her this evening. I told her I had to finish a song for Yash Chopra's film *Jab Tak Hai Jaan*.

We talk about the details of our lives every single day. isn't that living together? She came over this afternoon with some toys for our grandson whose birthday is coming up. He will be two years old on 8 February. Last night the whole family spent the evening together. This is living together. Yet Raakheeji lives in her house and I live in mine.

I don't need to explain, do i? The way we choose to live is personal.

NMK: I suppose people living in a different way from the conventional idea of family life can arouse curiosity.

G: Must I follow the conventions of others? I don't want people to peep into my window; they should just walk past. *[laughs]*

NMK: You have a close-knit staff whom you see every day. has your manager, Mr Kutty, worked with you for a long time?

G: I call him Kutty Saaheb. He has been with me for about twenty years. I depend on him totally. Every now and then he gets upset because he finds it awkward to keep telling people they cannot speak to me when they want. It is his responsibility to make sure I get four undisturbed hours each day to get on with my writing—no calls, no visitors. to manage this requires skill.

My driver Sunder has been with me for forty years. He used to drive Bosky to her kindergarten and is now taking her son to his pre-school.

NMK: What was the first car you owned?

G: A Fiat, then I had an ambassador. I did not buy an imported car until they started making Suzukis in India.

Sunder drives me everywhere. But when I need to travel long distances, he takes care of the house and I do the driving. I have driven at least four times to Kanyakumari, the southern most tip of India, and to the furthest north, to Badrinath.

When I was working on *Lekin*, I drove about five thousand miles to

various locations. I told Lataji my screen credit should be ‘Written, directed and driven by…’ *[we laugh]*

NMK: What does Farhana Mahmood, your other staff member, do?
G: I needed someone to type the scripts that I had written based on two novels and ten short stories by Premchand. The task took a full year. after she completed it, I asked her to stay on. I write in Urdu, in longhand, and she types the text in Urdu or Devanagari as required. She has a lot of work and that’s when I think to myself I really do write quite a lot.

Farhana has been with me for about six or seven years. If I need a copy of a poem, I just have to tell her the first line and she knows in which collection she will find it. She is a big help.

NMK: Your staff members see you every day. I am sure they can tell what mood you are in.
G: If I know their moods, I am sure they know mine. We are human beings working together. So we are bound to have moods. Only machines don’t have moods. You have to respect people and give them their space. This is how you can get on with people for a long time.

Another constant in my life is Dr S. G. Gokhale. He is my personal physician. I have known him for forty years. When I had to go on a location shoot, he would come to see me with a small medicine kit. He also prepared a first-aid kit for my whole unit. You will find his name in the credits of many of my films. Even now, he drops in from time to time to check my blood pressure and chats about the current political situation in the country.

People in my life have been very caring. Did I tell you about Ashok Bindal, another dear friend of mine? We call him ‘AB sir’ and also ‘Mushkil-kushaa’, the problem solver. He goes out of his way to help his friends. He is so selfless and generous.

Pavan Jha is also an old friend who knows my work better than I do. He runs my website ‘gulzaronline.com’. Whenever I need any information about a film or a book or any work I have done, I call him. He’s my encyclopaedia.

Preet is another friend. She lives in new York and runs a radio station there. She is very fond of Indian film music. If it happens to be Rafi Saaheb’s birthday or Mukeshji’s birthday, she will devise a radio programme in their name. She can recall countless film songs, especially those from the 1950s

and ’60s. She has a crazy way of speaking and changes subject at an amazing speed. I call her ‘jhalli kudi’ [mad girl] in Punjabi.

NMK: I hear you are a big star at the Jaipur Literature Festival and you cause a stampede there.
G: I am not a star. If I draw crowds at Jaipur it is because I work in films and not because I am a poet.

NMK: The Jaipur festival attracts many Indian authors writing in English. Do you enjoy reading their work?
G: I have read Vikram Seth and Salman Rushdie and others. But I particularly like Jhumpa Lahiri’s short stories. They are so well written.

In India, there has been a great change in attitude towards the English language. It was once considered a foreign language, but that is no longer the case. The earlier generation of Indian writers who wrote in English would use a kind of formal Oxford English. The writing was grammatically perfect and when they spoke, their accent was perfect. The way you spoke English once defined your status and sophistication. That’s all over. The current generation of Indian writers express themselves in an English that has the flavour of India.

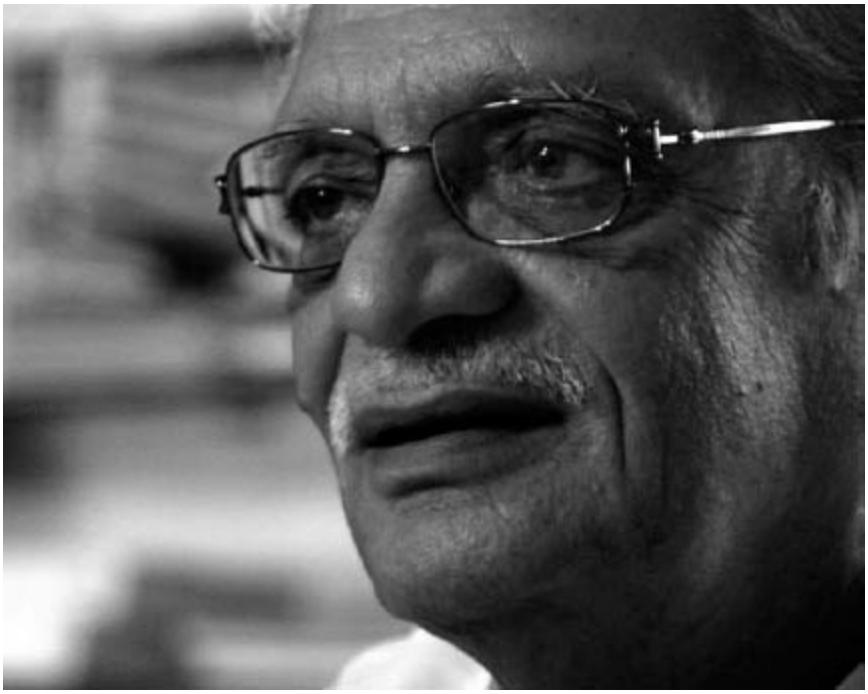
Even Chinese food in India becomes Indian. It does not remain pure Chinese.

NMK: Gulzar Saab, I am sure you’d agree that 2011, and even 2012, have been terrible years with the passing of many well-known personalities from all walks of life, including people you knew so well.
G: It has been a very difficult year. I have lost so many dear and close friends.

I was extremely sad to lose my friend, the poet Sukhbir. I had first met him in the 1950s. I heard two weeks ago that he had suffered a stroke and was admitted to the Bombay hospital. I went to see him. He was feeling a bit better and had gone home. He expired on 22 February [2012].

NMK: Will there be much in the press about Sukhbir?
G: The English press is largely unaware about writers in Indian languages. Many will write about Sukhbir in the Punjabi and Urdu press. When Shahryar

Saaheb died there was a small piece on him in *The Times of India*, otherwise there was virtually no mention of him in the English press. Doordarshan, the state television channel, showed a good programme on Shahryar Saaheb when he received the Jnanpith award, but no other TV channel has bothered to do anything on him.



2004. Photograph: Vivek Ranade.

I knew Sukhbir for sixty years and we shared a close friendship during all those years. I met old friends at his funeral whom I have not seen for ages. Sagar Sarhadi did not come. He does not attend funerals because he tells me they depress him.

NMK: It must be very disturbing for you to see bits of your world disappearing.

G: It is difficult to feel the absences in your inner circle. Jagjit left us and now Sukhbir—we were a very close-knit group. I can feel the circle shrinking, as they pass away, one by one. But this is what happens with advancing age. Now I meet some friends only at funerals. It is very sad. Time slowly pushes people closer and closer to the exit door and then they quietly slip through that door.

NMK: Please don't go near that door in a hurry.
G: *[laughs]* But that is the way it is. When I talk to my old friends from PWA, we promise each other that we will meet more often. Instead of meeting over a drink, we might meet over a poem at Ashok Bindal's chaupaal [a village square where elders meet to discuss village matters]. Bindal Saaheb and Rajinder gupta organize a chaupaal every month where writers and poets spend the evening together. New poems are read out and occasionally a classical or folk singer is invited to sing for the gathering. The meetings are open to everyone.

NMK: I was wondering why artists are viewed so differently when they die.
G: Many people feel a kind of resentment or prejudice against living artists. All is forgiven when they die. The body is ultimately a mundane thing and does not inspire great admiration and the moment the physical presence is gone, the person is perceived and valued in a different way. The physical presence of an artist blocks the way to immortality.

NMK: Among the people who recently passed away, there was also the marvellous Shammi Kapoor. Were you friends?
G: We had a very special connection. We were more or less the same age. There was no formality between us, but I always kept a respectful distance. He had a huge personality and was a fearless man.

The first time I met him was during the making of Ramesh Sippy's *Andaaz*. He taught me how to drink alcohol. One day I saw him drinking a chilled beer on a cold Manali morning. I was taken aback and asked him why a cold beer on a cold day? he said, 'Son, sit down. I better teach you how to chase a shot of Brandy with beer.' So he made me try it.

We once went to a party together during the outdoor shooting of *Andaaz* in Manali. He saw a pretty girl there and liked her but her husband was around too. Shammiji decided to go for a stroll in the garden and asked me to join him. While we were walking, I recited a poem to him— 'Ek shaayar tha behki-behki si baatein karta tha' [There was a crazy poet who said some crazy things]. Because he was making a film with the title *Pagla Kahin Ka*, Shammiji said, 'Why not change it to—"Ek pagla tha behki-behki si baatein karta tha?"' [There was a mad fellow who said some crazy things] I said why not and wrote down the lines for him on a piece of paper.

By then it had become very cold and I suggested I would go inside and get him a shawl. He said, ‘Don’t. What kind of a poet are you? Wait. Someone will come with a shawl for me.’

As the evening wore on, it became increasingly cold, so I insisted I’d fetch him his shawl. I went back inside the house and as I was about to pick up the shawl from a chair, the pretty girl we saw earlier asked, ‘are you taking the shawl to Shammiji?’ I said, ‘Yes, but I think you had better give it to him. It’s cold outside and he won’t heed my advice.’ She took the shawl from my hands and went into the garden to find him. *[laughs]*

Twenty or twenty-five years later I bumped into him at the holiday inn in Bombay. His wife Neilaji was with him. Shammiji took out the piece of paper on which I had scribbled the poem on that cold Manali evening from his wallet. to imagine that he had kept it safely for all those years—i thought it was phenomenal.

Shammi Kapoor was a man without inhibitions. There are a few really large-hearted and natural people in this world and he was one of them. At some point in his life, he decided to give everything up, saying, ‘I have decided to close shop and lead a spiritual life.’ he had the qualities of a saint.

NMK: You once told me about your involvement with handicapped children. How did that come about?

G: During the making of *Koshish*, Sanjeev Kumar, Jaya Bhaduri and I used to attend sign language classes in a school at Chowpatty. We had a young man on set who made sure Sanjeev and Jaya were signing correctly in their scenes. While making *Koshish*, I became very concerned about the problems that deaf people face.

At first we were a small team of people who worked together. Then in 1992, members of our team formed an NGO in Bhopal called ‘Arushi’ in order to expand their activities and include all handicapped children and not only deaf children. Many of the children who were at Arushi earlier still return to work as part-time teachers or help with the running of the place. We have a few schools for deaf children, one in Jogeshwari in Bombay, and the other in Bhopal, which is also run by Arushi. The schools are called ‘Koshish’.

I must tell you about an arushi volunteer, a young man called Dr Rohit Trivedi, who is blind. He did a PhD on Girish Karnad’s plays and is now

teaching literature at a girls' college. He is a marvellous human being.

NMK: Are the children taught Braille?
G: Yes. You know, people believe that Braille is only written in English, but that is not true. We have published Marathi, hindi and Urdu books in Braille, including Dr Abdul Kalam's biography *Wings of Fire*. It was translated into Urdu and accompanied by an audio CD. We are trying to publish in other languages too.

If you go to Mandu or Sanchi in Madhya Pradesh, you will find the directions at railway stations in Braille and the information plates at historical monuments as well. The government and the people of Madhya Pradesh and many corporate houses and banks have been very helpful in making all this happen.

Dr Milind Kirtane in Bombay initiated a recent medical experiment involving the implantation of a chip in the brain of very young deaf children. He performs countless cochlear implant surgeries. I have spent many hours with Dr Kirtane to understand the process involved. It requires a tremendous amount of post-operative care to help the child get used to sounds. It can take four or five years, but thanks to the chip, the children can ultimately hear and when they do, they can learn to speak.

A key volunteer at Arushi, Anil Mudgil, adopted a deaf child called Prarthana from an orphanage. We did not have her date of birth, so we decided to celebrate her birthday on 5 September, on teacher's Day, which is also the birthday of Dr S. Radhakrishnan who, besides once being the President of India, was a very well respected academic and philosopher.

Prarthana underwent the cochlear implant surgery. after the operation, she would cry but did not know where the sound of sobbing was coming from. Slowly she realized it was coming from her. One day the telephone rang in their house and Prarthana went to the instrument and flung it to the floor. Anil Mudgil called me at once, crying with joy. This was the first time she had reacted to the phone ringing, and most importantly, that she could identify the source of the sound! I was so happy to hear the news that I flew to Bhopal the next day to see Prarthana.

My involvement with handicapped children began thirty-five years ago and my connection to Arushi has grown deeper over the years. It is an important part of my life.

NMK: The brilliant Lawrence Olivier once said, ‘Living is strife and torment, disappointment and love and sacrifice, golden sunsets and black storms.’ Do you believe that?

G: I think Olivier must have been stressed out when he said that. I don’t think he was making a comment on life in general, but perhaps he was expressing his state of mind at that moment.

If I were to think of living as strife, it would be for a passing moment. But it is true that life isn’t always a bed of roses for everyone.

NMK: I don’t sense disenchantment or disillusionment in your poetry. Are you an optimist?

G: There are times when I am very pessimistic and at other times totally optimistic. But as such I don’t have dark moods. Of course I have problems and difficulties—but dark moods? I don’t think so. Life keeps changing and that’s the beauty of it. I think this is your answer:

The greatest moments of joy are spent with grandson Samay. Photograph by Samay's father, Govind.

Kuchh bhi qayam nahin hai kuchh bhi nahin
Raat-din gir rahe hain chausar par
Aundhi-seedhi-si kaudiyon ki tarah
Mah-o-saal haath lagte hain
Ungliyon se phisalte rehte hain
Kuchh bhi qayam nahin hai kuchh bhi nahin
Aur jo qayam hai ek bus main hoon
Main jo har pal badalta rehta hoon

[Nothing is permanent, nothing at all
Days and night fall on the chauser board
Like kauri shells, some face up others down
The months and years dealt out to you
Slip through your fingers
Nothing is permanent, nothing at all
And what is permanent is me
I, who is changing at every instant]

NMK: It is indeed an answer to my question. You may be constantly changing personally, but I am sure the appreciation of your work will be permanent. It will last through time.
G: I will have to die first! I do not think about all that. One hopes to be mentioned in the history of poetry. The question for me is not about attaining immortality, but whether I have contributed to society.

NMK: Do you think you are satisfied with the way things have turned out for you?
G: I had always hoped that one day I would become a successful writer, successful in the sense that my writing would not be empty and meaningless. After spending some years at the PWA, I gained enough confidence to feel what I would write would at least be attached to life and have some social relevance.

When I think of success, I ultimately mean success in one's own eyes. You must have conviction in what you say or do and that conviction must come from within you. If you lack conviction, you cannot convince anyone and your work will have little significance.

I was once asked an interesting question in a Q and a session. at the end of the session, in which I was made to feel old and of an entirely different generation, someone asked me, 'What do you want to say to the younger generation?'

I thought about it and answered, 'They should not dismiss the past and take it along with them. I ask them to hold my hand and not leave me behind as they walk ahead. I will try and keep pace.'

Daud daud kar qadam milaata hoon

Uff yeh zindagi kitni tez chalti hai

[I run to stay in step
Goodness, how swiftly this life walks]

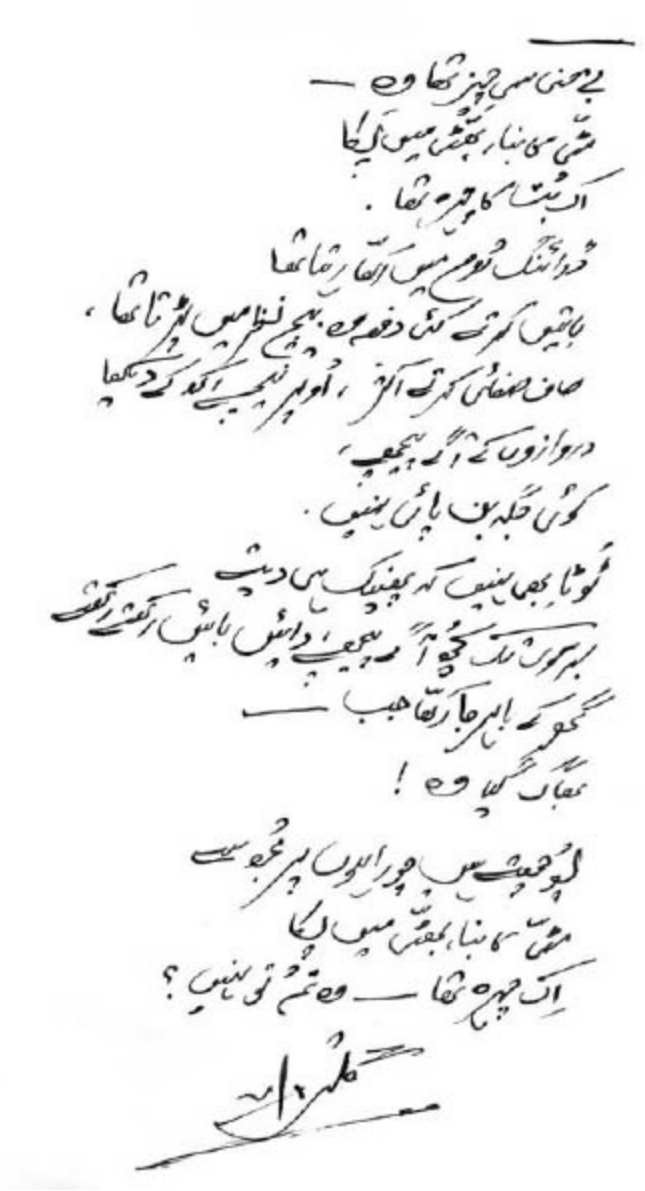
NMK: Why do you write, and for whom?
G: *[thoughtful]* It's difficult to find a simple answer. At the start of our conversations, I talked about an inner energy that rises like steam. The reason I first turned to writing was to release that steam. If you don't let it out, you cannot survive. I had to. I would have gone crazy otherwise. The second reason came from an awareness of the world around me and from the desire to share my experience of life.

This is more or less how I can answer your question.

NMK: You have worked in Indian cinema since the 1960s—do you have a sense of belonging to the film industry?
G: Do I really belong to films? When you ask me that, it makes me question myself. Where do I belong? I came to films from literature—from an urge to learn how to write songs and screenplays, and finally how to direct. I entered the world of films reluctantly and walked away by choice. I am still circling around that world, but from the outside.

After all these years, I still feel I don't belong to films. So when you ask me this question, I want to ask you, 'Do you think I belong?'

NMK: Not entirely. You're an insider and an outsider. Perhaps you are somewhat like the clay figurine in the poem you said once described your position in the family—where to place you is the question.
G: *[smiles]* Let us part over that poem.



Bemaani si cheez tha vo
Mitti ka bana bhatti mein paka
Ik butt ka chehra tha
Drawing room mein rakha rehata tha
Baatein karte kai dafa wo beech nazar mein padta tha
Ek jagah se dusri jaanib rakhna, khiskaana padta tha
Saaf safaayi karte aksar upar neeche rakh ke dekha
Darwaazon ke aage peechhey
Koi jagah ban paayi nahin
Toota bhi nahin ke phaink hi dete

Barson tak kuchh aage peechey daayein baayein rakhte rakhte
Ghar ke baahar ja rakha jab…
Bhaag gaya vo!
Poochhte hain aksar chauraahe par ab mujhse
Mitti ka bana bhatti mein paka
Ik chehra tha…vo tum to nahin?

[An insignificant thing it was
Made of clay, fired in a kiln
A clay figurine
Lying somewhere in the drawing room
Obstructing the view of chatterers
Moved here, there and everywhere
In bouts of cleaning it found itself
In front of the door, behind the door
Somehow it fitted nowhere
Not broken, so couldn't be thrown away
For years was moved up, down, right, left
When finally put outside the house…
…it ran away!
I am often asked at the crossroads
Made of clay, fired in a kiln
A clay figurine, was that possibly you?]

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Born in India, documentary filmmaker and writer Nasreen Munni Kabir lives in London, where she has made several programmes on Hindi cinema for Channel 4 TV, including the forty-six-part series *Movie Mahal* and *The Inner/Outer World of Shah Rukh Khan*. Her several books include *Guru Dutt: A Life in Cinema*, *Talking Films* and *Talking Songs* with Javed Akhtar, *A. R. Rahman: The Spirit of Music*, *Lata Mangeshkar: In Her Own Voice* and five publications featuring the complete dialogue of classic films like *Mughal-e-Azam* and *Awaara*.

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I wake up at five when it is still dark.

I want the sun to look for me instead of my looking for the sun.

Just as the first serve in tennis can be advantageous,

so the first serve must be mine.

The second goes to the sun.